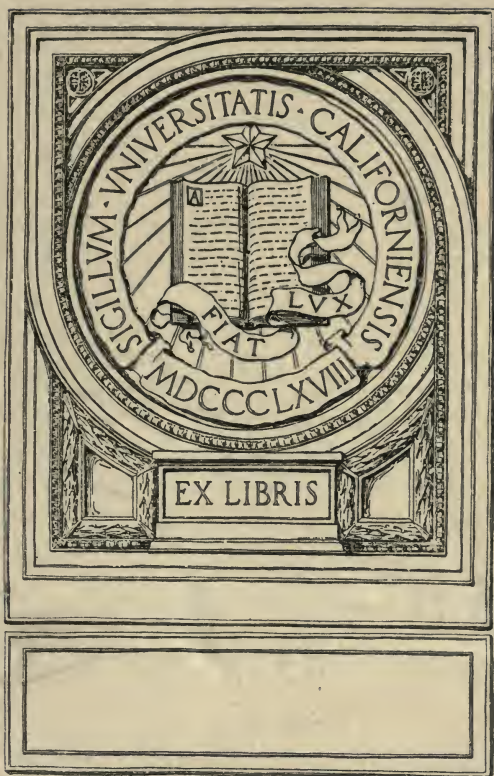


ON THE
WOOL TRACK

C.E.W. BEAN





UNIV. OF
CALIFORNIA

ON THE WOOL TRACK

70 .viii
AUGUST 1900

UNIV. OF
CALIFORNIA

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2008 with funding from
Microsoft Corporation



THE WOOL PRESS.
(See page 203.)

[Frontispiece.]

ON THE WOOL TRACK

BY

C. E. W. BEAN

AUTHOR OF "WITH THE FLAGSHIP IN THE SOUTH"; AND LATELY
SPECIAL COMMISSIONER OF THE "SYDNEY MORNING HERALD" IN
THE WOOL LAND

Illustrated with photographs by GEORGE BELL
of the "Sydney Mail"



THE
Wool
Track

LONDON: ALSTON RIVERS, LTD.
BROOKE STREET, HOLBORN BARS, E.C.

1910

BU 104
B42

The Author is especially indebted to Mr Archibald Marshall, special correspondent of the London "Daily Mail," who visited Australia with the delegates of the Imperial Chamber of Commerce, for his spontaneous help and advice; to the proprietors of the "Sydney Morning Herald" for their permission to publish this book and their assistance in obtaining the illustrations; to Mr George Bell of the "Sydney Mail" for a number of Photographs which no one but he could have procured; and to the many hosts, fellow passengers and friends, both in the back country and in Sydney, who made the compilation of these chapters a work of real pleasure.

TO THE
LIBRARY OF
ARCHIBALD

To

THE TWO OLDEST AND BEST
FRIENDS A MAN COULD WISH
FOR, THIS BOOK IS AFFECTION-
ATELY DEDICATED BY THEIR
BROTHER

252244

PREFACE

THE RED COUNTRY

THIS day as I write, the Namoi River has come down from the hills in flood for the second time within six months. There are people at this moment crowded on to the house roofs watching sheep and haystacks and telegraph poles float past them. There are little lonely homesteads far down the river-flats where last night, in the dark, they could hear through the wooden walls the far-off roar of the water rising. The man, may be, went out into the black, and as he opened the door the roar of the river sounded savagely close. What chance have they of help if anything happens unless somebody goes out twenty miles to help them? Somebody may go out; or if he does not, there is a chance they will struggle out through the twenty miles somehow by themselves. That is what is making Australia.

Now those men, women, and children are not out there for sport. They are out there to grow wool, and this is a part of the day's work in the wool

industry. The writer of these chapters has tried to show what the life on the back stations really is for the men and the women who live and work there. He was instructed by the proprietors of the *Sydney Morning Herald* (by whose kindness he is allowed to republish them here) to describe the wool industry from any point of view which he chose. The wool industry turns out wool and meat and tallow and glue and cold cream, and many other things. But the most important things it turns out are men. And so the articles dealt with men. They followed down the long wool track from the paddock to the loom, the industry which is the chief training of Australians, mostly through the country where that life is most typical. That is the red country.

Floods come once in a way. They are hardly typical of the red country. But the drought is. When we Australians have sung our blue skies and soft airs, our sea beaches and gardens and fruits, our short toil and long pleasure, perhaps we shall some day sit down and praise our droughts. Australians owe more to the droughts.

It must not be taken that all Australia is like the red country. City-bred Australians go very little into the "outside" country. Even the immigrants do not go there; or if they do, they return to the "inside" country where life is easier and

profits are as large. The "outside" country will always be pastoral. At present a living area there is about twenty thousand acres. When a big run is cut up for closer settlement, the settlers may be able to see each others' homesteads through the telescope. The immigrant and most Australians make for country which will some day be agricultural. And who will blame them? It is the hard-bitten, frosted old customers, the hard cases, the failures, the men who are battered and scarred, who have, perhaps because of some weakness, fallen behind the running in the inner country, that find their way, almost for a refuge, out to the red country.

Perhaps that is why the red country, with the narrow black-soil river-flats which cross it, is the scene of most of these chapters. It is a country where bad men are very bad, and good men are magnificent; but where all men are interesting. And if, when the time comes to describe the red country, the writer lingers a little over things that may not be merely wool industry, perhaps it may be forgiven him. The red country does not contain half the wool-growing in Australia, or anything like it. It does not even deserve its place here as being typical of all pastoral Australia. But it is typical of the great tracts, in the Northern territory and elsewhere, to which the pastoral industry of Australia will in the end retreat.

If you draw a rough circle well inside the map of Australia about four hundred miles inland from the coast-line, the country inside that line is quite different from the country outside of it, in the Eastern half of Australia, at anyrate. The country outside that line has in parts a heavy tropical rainfall, and heavy tropical forest, and heavy tropical atmosphere. In other parts it is not so very different from Europe. But the country inside that line is the problem of Australia.

That country, though it makes up the inside of Australia, they call the "outside" country, because the centre of Australia is uninhabited, and this is the country which is on the farthest outskirts of civilisation. One was inclined to think it was "out-back" before one got there. White Cliffs seemed to be pretty well out-back from Wilcannia. But one found men quite surprised if one said so. However far you chase it, there is always an out-back beyond. Probably if one got past the centre line of the continent one would have to turn round and hunt it back again.

If an Englishman saw the red country in some years he would probably say it was the old Sahara Desert. Some of the explorers did say so. And then other explorers went there in other years and said they had found a beautiful pastoral country with grass waist-high. And they were both right.

That country does turn into a Sahara in drought time, except where there happens to be scrub upon it. And it has so much impressed people that they have laid far too much stress upon the drought and forgotten the more extraordinary change which happens afterwards.

For about half of Australia has a certain quite astonishing quality, which only those who have seen it can realise. It is a quality gradually developed in the plant life of the country through continual trial by drought and by fire. Drought and fire have come upon Australia so regularly for so many æons of time that no plant whose seed could not resist them had any chance of surviving. Consequently, if the country becomes a desert above them the seeds that are below the surface of the desert will live for fifteen or twenty years at least, waiting for a favourable rain or goodness knows what other conditions to turn that desert into country as well grassed, for the time, as England itself. After the last flood grass grew on Boola-bookka Lake, east of Menindie, which had been dormant first under drought and then under flood for fifteen years; and at Bourke at this moment there are some who hope to see on the common after these spring rains, at least some sign of Mitchell or other grasses which have not been seen there since 1894 – or, some say, since the flood in 1890.

If the people in Mars are watching the earth through telescopes just now, when they are close to it, the place that must puzzle them will be Australia. Because when last they were close to the earth—two years ago—Australia was pink. Now it is green. And if they could watch it they would see it change almost every year. In some years the centre of it does actually become a desert—a red sandy desert, with the surface blown off it and piled in sandhills by any wind that comes along. And then down comes the rain in the proper part of the month, and the particular grass or herb, or even tree, which this extraordinary Australian nature has marked up on her calendar against that particular day or two, comes up and turns the land into a wheatfield. It is as though England and the Sahara Desert got mixed, and one was always flushing up for the time and effacing the other.

Well, so far they have found that this particular country—the interior—is exceedingly well suited to the growing of fine wool. It may be that they will some day discover something else to suit it, and make it a country where people grow some kind of wheat or fruit, which is very unlikely, but would probably be for the better, or even a country where men have to work in factories, which would probably be for the worse. But, be it for better or for worse, if ever the old industries are changed, so

will the old population be changed. The new types may be good—sturdy, heavy-limbed farmers, healthy fruit-pickers and fruit-packers; or they may be nervous, narrow, city-bred factory folk. But, good or bad, they will not be the old types. If ever the wool industry of Australia were to be not merely supplemented, but supplanted, by other industries, the old types of the Australian, such as they are, would go with it.

And there are some that would be very sorry to say good-bye to them.

CONTENTS

CHAP.	PAGE
1. THE MAKER OF A CONTINENT	1
2. THE CHARACTER HE HASN'T	17
3. THE BOSS	33
4. BEFORE THE PADDOCKS	50
5. WHEN FENCES CAME	57
6. ON THE MOUNTAINS	70
7. THE RED COUNTRY	85
8. HOW IT HAPPENED	92
9. THE WOOL TOWNSHIPS	103
10. THE GREAT RUNS	109
11. THE GENIUS OF AUSTRALIA	122
12. THE HOMESTEAD MAN	129
13. THE HOMESTEAD MAN— <i>continued</i>	148
14. MOBILISATION—AND THE COOK	157
15. UNDERCURRENTS	174
16. HONESTY	190
17. WAGES	205

CHAP.	PAGE
18. TRAVELLERS ALL—FOOTMAN AND BAGMAN .	218
19. PORTS AND FLEETS OF THE DARLING . .	228
20. THE BULLOCKY	243
21. THE PORTER	256
22. OUTWARD BOUND	268
23. THE LAST CHAPTER	282

ILLUSTRATIONS

THE WOOL PRESS	<i>frontispiece</i>
THEY READ THE WEEKLY PAPERS TO THE ADVER-	FACING PAGE
TISEMENTS ON THE BACK COVER . . .	62
IF AN AUSTRALIAN HAS ANYTHING TO EXPLAIN, THIS	
IS THE WAY HE DOES IT	122
AN IMMIGRANT	132
THE SHEARERS' COOK	166
THE SHED	180
A SHEARER TRAVELLING	220
THE BULLOCK WAGON	250

ON THE WOOL TRACK

I

THE MAKER OF A CONTINENT

THERE was death in the paddock. For nine days the police had followed a man's footsteps. Now and again the footmarks would turn back upon themselves. Now they would lead round and round a tree. Now they would shoot off at right angles. At long intervals they had found depressions and scratches in the surface which showed where he had gone down on his hands and knees to lap the dregs of last month's rain still lying in some claypan.

And now, at last, after nine days' hard following, they found towards the evening that the footmarks began to drag. They could see clearly the long scrape of the toe before each heel-mark. They hurried on, following for all they were worth. Presently they came to his hat. There the dark closed in upon them. It was too black to follow, and they had to camp.

That night down came the rain. And in the morning every trace of the tracks they were following was sponged away as from a slate. All day they searched—both the trooper and the black tracker. Months later, a boundary rider came upon his coat. There were letters in it from some man in Scotland. And from that day to this those were all the traces that they found of him.

Long afterwards a letter came back from the man in Scotland to whom the police had written. He was a doctor there, and the dead man's brother. The dead man had been working his way through the far West from station to station on foot. He had suddenly announced that he meant to walk to Sydney. Probably he drank. Certainly he went mad.

Now, the paddock where that man was lost was not twenty miles out of Menindie. He never got out of the one paddock. It was no bigger than most other western paddocks—ten miles by ten miles. And yet either in that paddock or in the one which we drove through next to it, the boundary riders have ridden across, at one time or another, the skeletons of three men, with their swags scattered near them, just as they lay down when they came to the end of their strength.

Not Twenty Miles Out 3

The truth is that a great part of New South Wales out-back there—though it is marked off into little squares on the map and has well-known names written over it and even roads drawn through it, and therefore is never dreamed of by us city folk as being any different from other civilised lands—is not really as yet a country in which a man can be sure of keeping his life.

When the first white men pushed out into that country from the fringe of the known country, each man took his life in his hands; and they knew it. There was some danger from blacks—not a very great danger. The real danger was from the country itself. The white men—Burke and Wills and others—went provided against that danger, with stock and water-bags and provisions, even with camels. And then, with it all, sometimes those men gave out and died.¹

¹ For example, the paper this morning—January 31, 1910—contains the following message. It was sent along the wires by one of a party who were making for the Tanami gold-field—which is in a particularly distant and desolate corner. "Failed to reach field via Treuer Ranges, got out sixty miles, driven back, no water. Terribly hot, all native wells and holes dried up. Frayne (leader) perished while trying to locate water. Made back to line at Barrow Creek. I had to leave loading and ride on, perishing. As a last resource, cut wires and worked north, hoping to meet linesman for repairs. Got water on the road. Further particulars next station."

One has seen the country where men have died; and if the place had not actually done men to death, one would not have dreamed that there could be any cruelty in the heart of it. There were no Alpine precipices, no avalanches or volcanoes or black jungles full of wild beasts, no earthquakes, not even a flood or a bushfire. The countryside looked like a beautiful open park, with gentle slopes and soft grey tree clumps. Nothing appalling or horrible rushed upon these men. Only there happened—nothing. There might have been a pool of cool water behind any one of those tree clumps; only—there was not. It might have rained any time; only—it did not. There might have been a fence or a house just over the next rise; only—there was not. They lay down with the birds hopping from branch to branch above them and the bright sky peeping down at them. No one came. Nothing happened. That was all.

What even Australians do not realise—often until it is past mattering whether they realise it or not—is that in the greater part of this Western country there has only been made one difference since the explorers first came out upon it. It is precisely the same beautiful, endless, pitiless country that it was when they found it—with one exception. Sheep have come there.

Men have made of the West a country in any part of which sheep can live, as a general rule. That is all. Men can't live there. It is when they think they can that they come to grief. They have made themselves homesteads—little redoubts fifty or a hundred miles apart where they can defend themselves securely enough when they get there. But over the wide spaces in between they have to stage from water to water, from tank to tank, or well to well. And it was not for them the water was dammed or these wells sunk. It was for the sheep. Except for the sheep, and the sheep alone, the West would be, and is, to-day as the untamed centuries had left it—as the first white man, when he came over the red sandhill on the horizon to the edge of the pine scrub, found it. Some way out of Menindie we happened to drive through a paddock that had been unstocked for many years. It gave one a glimpse of what the white man did find.

It was almost impossible to get out of one's head the idea that one was driving through a park. One could swear that a glimpse of the house, or the white pinafores of the children playing in the grass, or the ornamental water, or the pet Jersey cows must turn up round the next corner. As a matter of fact, there was not a house or a pinafore or even a cow within twenty miles. We saw that

day the tracks of one boundary rider, of two buggies which had been through a fortnight before, and of a wild dog and his mate. We passed—miles away—one tank. But the bottom of it was dry sand. We were following these buggy tracks over the horizon for three hundred miles, and at times they were the only thing to follow. One of us was a skilled bushman, or the chances are the other would not have found the buggy wheels, and would have lain down under the trees and the blue sky; and—perhaps they might have found him later.

But one could not help believing it was a park, in spite of it all. Pretty pine trees, blue clumps of applewood, needlewood, belar, grey-blue mulga, with the exquisite black tracery of its delicate branches showing under the leaves, sailed by in groups on either side of us. Up a shallow glade between them the long white beards of spear-grass three seasons old were standing, in parts knee-deep. The road—the one sign of man's work—wound through the grass away out of sight. And along it, far ahead of us, startled by the trotting horses, bounced two kangaroos, mother and young one, furlong after furlong. Others we started and sent off into the scrub—at least a dozen or two—grey and brown. But these two stuck to the road as though it were made for them—disappearing some-

times where it wound behind the trees, but always turning up, still bumping along it where it wound out again beyond. No wonder men thought the land would carry any stock they liked to cram upon it.

Emu and kangaroo swarmed through that paddock. How they had found it out, Heaven knows. But it gave one the impression that the white men who first came out upon new country must have found it teeming with life. As a matter of fact, one of them told us afterwards that they did not. Life teemed around the lakes—duck, teal, swans, kangaroo, emu, brolga, pelican, ibis, and all the rest. But on the waterless back-country—this man said—they came out on an almost ghastly stillness, long white grass, soft blue trees, no animals, few blacks.

“Why, even the Mulga blacks from out-back had to come down to the Darling for water, so they told me,” he said, “sneaking down by night and getting back again before daybreak for fear of the Darling blacks. There were great battles if they were caught, for their law was never to trespass on each other’s grounds.

“Well, there wasn’t enough water for the blacks at some times. As for the animals, you would not see a beast or even a bird. The only ones we did see were those ‘twelve apostles,’

8 On the Wool Track

and I'm sure I don't know what they did for water.

"That was before we dug the tanks in the paddocks. As soon as the tanks began to gather water the game began to find it out, and they became thick enough after that."

Those tanks were put down for the sheep. So that the sheep were actually responsible for making this country not only to some extent livable for men or for tame animals, but even for its own wild animals.

Some of the features of the country which even those who live amongst them take for granted have been brought about, apparently, by sheep. We spent one night at the homestead of a man who was the first to take a homestead lease in the Central West. He was a grand man, and the only man of all—squatters and selectors—who survived the drought in that part. It was a very isolated little home, the furthest selection out. That night, at first from far in the scrub, afterwards, of all places, just outside my window, came the most dismal, alarming, long-drawn howl that it may be one's misfortune ever to listen to. It was a wild dog that had killed a sheep the day before, and came under cover of dark, howling after the station dogs. It was a lonely place and no mistake.

At the back of that house, stretching away acre after acre to the hills, and for miles along the road to the south of it, was a thick pine-forest. With a few exceptions here and there, where they happened to catch a watercourse, every pine tree in that forest was dead—leafless and almost branchless. It was the feature of the country thereabouts. According to the man who had watched it grow, the sheep were the cause of that forest. The only thing they were not responsible for was its death. The drought caused that.

“It was this way,” said the old man. “When first I rode my horse on to this red country, he sank into it up to his fetlocks at every step. It was all beautifully-grassed open country away to the hills—not a pine tree on it. But the soil was so loose that the sheep drove their feet deep into it as they walked over it.

“It was open country then. In about a year or two the sheep had trodden in the face of it and hardened it. I think they must have affected some seed that was hidden in it all the time, for no sooner was the ground hard than up came this pine scrub thick all over the face of it. It grew and grew into this forest, as you see it. And then came the drought and killed it all.”

And there you see the relics at this day—acre after acre of bare grey poles. There is nowhere

any trace of such previous destruction; which makes it probable, though not certain, that there had not for centuries before been any such drought. It is not certain because the sheep were not there in those centuries; and they may have been responsible for some change—in the hardness of the ground, for example, which helped this last drought to destroy the trees that had survived the others.

Providence only knows what the sheep are not responsible for, in the West, because the West is such a country to play with. In places they have trampled a drafting yard to dust for twenty years; and the first spring rain after they left it has brought up grasses that had not been seen for a generation. In other places, with the rabbits to help them, during the drought they have eaten out the roots of the grass and saltbush, and so trampled and trodden and powdered the face of the country that it has blown clean away and piled itself up behind tree clumps and over fences and old stockyards, where you can see it to-day, and drive your buggy over it, fences and all, if you care to; and has left behind great piebald patches of shiny bare clay, which, if the sheep go on with their work and trample it to powder, also may possibly bear grass and saltbush again—or may not. At least, that is perhaps the most general of the utterly conflicting

Someone should Write a Book 11

opinions. Someone ought to write a book about the West.

Whatever the sheep may or may not have done, they have done this for Australia. As far as the West is livable for men, it is the sheep and sheep alone that have made it so. You cannot wander to nowhere nowadays. There are at least fences across the plain—though the next one may be over the horizon. And there is water now every thirty miles or so, if only you know where to find it. The first thing an owner does is to find depressions, dam them, run drains from them like the spokes of a wheel for as much as two miles to catch every precious drop that falls. Once caught, he does all he can to keep it—builds high mounds round the banks to stave off the dry winds, plants trees, even tries covering the tanks with water weeds to protect them from the sun. They say that there are days on which as much as an inch of water evaporates in these parts: and as only nine to twelve inches fall on the plain around during an average year, they have to be careful of them. So they made their preparations, and they stocked this beautiful country with millions of sheep—with a sheep to three acres in some places.

And then came three years in which seven inches of rain fell.

Well, what could they do in a country like that?

Men can get about in a country where there are tanks and fences for sheep. But when the tanks were dry, and the fences sandhills, and the sheep dead, a simple commercial traveller's buggy drive became as dangerous, sometimes, as a dash for the Pole. We met one man who had started to drive a dry stage of seventy miles from Eighteen-mile Well, out of Bourke, to Wanaaring, to collect arrears on sewing machines. They picked him up alone two mornings later two and a half miles out of Wanaaring waving a handkerchief on a stick, and whispering, "Water—back there!" They took water back there for four miles and found his mate and the two horses collapsed. Some twig had scratched their water-bag. That was all.

It is wonderful what a time people have lasted—especially children—when lost like this. One policeman told us, if one remembers the story aright, of three children who wandered from a Central Western homestead out into the long grass. For nine days they hunted them, all hands at the station lining out and working up and down paddock after paddock. Then they found them collapsed, but alive. The eldest, a girl, had kept them alive on yams or roots of some sort. The superintendent of police at Bourke had an almost stranger story.

Nine Days Waterless 13

"It was in the eighties," he said, "that two children got lost just going back after school to their homes on the outskirts of the town here—two little toddlers. The grass was long on the common then—I haven't seen a blade of it since '94. A search-party looked for them and could not find them. I had a tracker here then called Charlie—a black from a Diamantina run, and such a tracker that I had made the owner promise, if ever he dispensed with him, to let me have him. I took Charlie out. We made a circle twelve miles from the town. And we cut their track.

"Charlie followed the track at a canter, seeing it ahead of him by the turn of the grass blades, where you or I could not possibly have suspected it."

From Bourke you can see far over the plain one solitary table-topped hill. Its name is Mount Oxley. It is twenty-eight miles away. "We followed the tracks to Mount Oxley," said the superintendent, "and there they turned. We turned after them, and four days from the day they were lost, thirty-eight miles out, within a mile of the Bogan River, we found the toddlers. They were pretty poor. But we brought them in all right."

The superintendent bent over his desk and hunted for a paper. Finally he got it, and handed it across the table. "That'll give you an

14 On the Wool Track

idea," he said. "Every month or two we get these reports."

It was an ordinary typewritten police officer's report from a place seventy miles out. It said that two boundary riders only last week, while mustering in a paddock on Clifton Downs station near Yantabulla, had come on the body of a man, very much shrunk, in brown singlet and trousers—billycan by him—knife open at his side—swag, with tentfly, and apparel lying around—bicycle close at hand—all much damaged by weather. He was midway between the track to Willara and another track. Officer thought he had probably tried a short-cut, and had missed the tank.

"They're all right," said the superintendent, "until something happens. Then they're done."

That is to say, that in this year 1909, in the back country of Sydney, a man can travel by taking advantage of the provision that is made there for sheep, without danger of losing his life for just so long as the man is a sane, healthy, whole man, or the provision can be found. If anything happens—if he breaks a leg, sprains an ankle, gets drunk, goes mad, as he often has done,—he has about as much chance as Shackleton would have had if the same thing had happened at the Pole. If he is a town man and takes the wrong road, just because it happens to have bigger

ruts, as a tailor did on the way to Louth some time since, and the ruts go thirty miles and peter out, the chances are he will be found, as the tailor was, just eleven days too late, with his bicycle hung in a tree and his clothes lying around. There are main roads in the centre of New South Wales of which a town man can barely see the traces. We struck one like that.

“There’s been a lot of traffic along here,” said the driver when we cut it. You could see all the wheel marks for years—there appeared to be exactly fourteen of them. Another road was traceable by the ruts which stood out of the ground—not into it, because some wagon had hardened the sand there, and the years had worn away the sand around it. Another road through the grass was marked by the white line of the wild oats which had caught in the old ruts and grown there.

Those are the landmarks for human beings in these parts. They are apt to be overlooked by one who is not used to them—to his peril. But then the provision around him is for sheep, not for men—sheep which may go six weeks without water. Where the Australian country has driven back the sheep, as it has from South Australian runs over the border, it has driven the white man too—a *fortiori*—and the land is desolate, fences down, homesteads ruined.

There, around Lake Eyre, and over some part of Central Australia you may see them to-day—deserted homesteads standing out from the desert with the marks of old settlement around them. That is what sheep mean to Australia.

II

THE CHARACTER HE HASN'T

"It's a cur'ous thing," said the bullock-driver, shifting his pipe from one corner of his straight, strong, comprehensive mouth to the other, "it's a cur'ous thing, when you think of it, that though we most has made our whack out of 'em, you never 'eard tell a good yarn about a sheep."

The bullock-driver heaved himself slowly up, and strode out of the fierce firelight into the blackness. We could hear him kicking down a rotten pine stump. Presently he returned, and flung it on top of the blaze. That extraordinary country—though the whole West is extraordinary for that matter—was nothing but dead pine-forest. We were on the edge of probably a hundred square miles of pine trees, all as straight and shiny and dead as any door-nails. Beyond that was ragged mallee and spinifex—green tufts of porcupine grass, which will blaze like kerosene if you drop a match on them. Being mallee and spinifex, the country between Mount Hope

18 On the Wool 'Track

and the Willandra had been overlooked or understocked, and the grass was standing high in it at a time when Riverina and the south were getting one of the worst gruellings on record. Consequently bullock teams had flocked there as mysteriously as migrating birds, to be kept alive on other people's grass for so long as other people suffered them, and perhaps just a little wee bit longer. When the managers got really angry they moved on, and often did a little carrying just for the look of the thing. So carrying was dirt cheap, and it was a rosy time for Mount Hope.

We were at Fourteen Mile Well, on the boundary of Roto run. The bullocky's team must have been somewhere near, enjoying themselves in the Roto grass, which was luscious and long. The bullocky was camped right under the well. His wagon, all sheeted in, showed vaguely like some huge rounded boulder in front of the fire. Behind, black against the sky, we could see the great winze of the well; and the low, long iron of the trough occasionally glinted in the firelight. Far away, like a cigarette end in the dark, a tiny spark showed where we, too, had camped for the night under a wilga tree. The chink chink of hobbles came to us, always getting farther away. Our horses, too,

were enjoying themselves on Roto grass. The bullocky shifted his pipe again.

“You see, a 'orse is different,” he said. “A 'orse has the feelings of a man; and a mare—she's just a woman over again. I had an old mare once that had a foal, and she was that jealous of it she wouldn't allow any 'orse to come near it. You know how 'orses will always come up to a foal. Well, if they came anywhere near her foal she lathered out at them quick and lively. She'd let the station children come up and play with it, but the scraggy stock 'orses she couldn't bear. When 'orses came near that foal she'd lay back her ears and charge them like a bull. I've seen her rush at 'em and wheel round in such a terrible hurry that she missed her footing and tumbled fair over on her back.

“Well, one day there was someone come along with a good sort of a 'orse—a beautiful, big, well-groomed riding 'orse, and they let 'im out in the paddock with her. I was half-frightened what might happen to him, for I knew he'd take notice of the foal. Right enough! He went straight up to him, and bent his neck over him and nosed him. I tell you, the old mare never winked an eyelash. She just arched her neck—preened herself like you see an old parrot—fairly flowing over with pleasure and pride.

"Tell me she didn't know the difference between a handsome, well-groomed feller and a scraggy stock 'orse?"

"'Orses are just like 'umans; and so are bullocks, though you mightn't think it. Look 'ere, I'll tell you what I've seen 'em do. I was with two men rounding up some pretty wildish sort of cattle on a ridge in the hills one day. There was a crick ran down the valley on the left, and about half a mile down the course of it was the place where these cattle used to cross it. I knew when we set 'em going they'd make down along the same track they always took to the crossing—they must have gone that way every day. So I told the two hands with me to ride back along the ridge, and then make a circle across the crick and down to this crossing. They were to cooe when they got there, and I was to drive the mob down. When the cattle crossed they were to head them downstream—the way we wanted to send them—and stop them from breaking back.

"The men went off, and I stayed there to hold the cattle. Every single beast in that mob had his head stuck in the air, watching what we were doing with wide eyes. From the moment the men rode off they watched me. They watched me all the time—never took their eyes off me for an instant.

The Craft of Cattle

21

"I sat on my 'orse, and waited and waited for that cooee—them watching me. And at last, from far down the crick behind the wattles and the gum trees in the valley, came the sound of a 'cooee.' That instant every single pair of horns in the mob turned right round—all together, as quick and clean as if they were soldiers drilling—looking in the direction the sound came from.

"Well, I began cracking my stockwhip and singing out, and they started off. But do you think they went down the track to the crossing place? They'd gone down it hundreds of times. In ordinary times they'd have gone down it full bang, tearing over wattles and suckers. In ordinary times nothing could have stopped 'em.

"But this time, as I cracked the whip at 'em, they came straight up the ridge towards me. I made all the noise I could, but they came straight ahead. When they got up to me the mob just split in two, and went past me quite close on either side. I knew it was useless, so I just let them go. They weren't going down the valley for me. They'd heard that cooee, and they knew something was up.

"Oh, cattle are clever—dead crafty. You know the noise they ordinarily make going along a road. Well, you'd think you c'd hear them if they were anyways near you, wouldn't you? Do you know,

I've known 'em steal past me in camp not twenty yards away, and me not hear them? It's the truth. After I've camped at night I've known them steal away on their toes—yes, on the tips of their toes, it must have b'n, just like men.

"But what gen'ly gave them away, though—each beast has got a mate. They'd lose sight of their mates in the dark and start lowing to one another to find them. But even then it was no bellowing like the way they bellow to one another at ordinary times. It was—mo-ooo . . . maw-aw . . . muu-u. . . . You know the way they ordinarily answer one another—one high, another low, only so soft like you'd scarcely reckonise it.

"I've had 'em go by not twenty yards off, with me in my tent there not hearing them at all. But when I used to hear that moo-oo . . . maw-aw . . . muu . . . u . . . I'd know it w's time to get my 'orse quick and go after 'em.

"That's like cattle. But you never 'eard a story of sheep like that, did you? I've 'eard a man say a dozen times this past week, 'As silly as a sheep.' If a fellow calls you a sheep it's good enough to clip him under the jaw, isn't it? But I never 'eard a story about a sheep yet."

Now, that yarn is true—for the man that told it was true; and the moral is quite true, too, when you come to think of it. Everyone has a yarn to

No Yarns about Sheep 23

tell about his dog and his horse, and even his cow and his cat. But who ever tells yarns about his sheep—even about their vices? The sheep hasn't got any. It hasn't apparently any character at all. The best way to describe it is to describe what it hasn't got. Rudyard Kipling says:—"The 'orse 'e knows above a bit, the bullock's but a fool"—which was wrong, according to the bullocky—"the elephant's a gentleman, the battery mule's a mule; but the commissariat camuel, when all is said and done, 'e's a infant an a ostrich an a orphan child in one."

A sheep isn't even that. He's just a sheep. Probably that's why nobody takes any interest in him—any personal interest, that is. Occasionally a lamb loses its mother and has to be spoon-fed. The station children grow fond of it and pet it, and its tail is left long and it is called "Clara." In the end Clara invariably turns up on the dinner table to be carved, and becomes for a day the family joke.

Since this chapter was first written I have heard one story about a sheep. A one-time stockman, who had read what was written above, brought it to me. He said he once knew a sheep which had a character. It always wanted to go to the right. They were sending in some sheep to the homestead to be killed and they sent this one

amongst them. When they got to the homestead they rounded them up to the gate of the yards and put them at it; but every time this particular wether veered to the right and led the mob astray. In the end they had to send for a gun and shoot it.

Apart from a statement in *Chambers's Encyclopædia* that a ram has been known to overthrow a bull in a fight by charging him, that is the one interesting yarn one has heard about a sheep. Perhaps he appeals to pity.

By far the most rich men in Australia owe every penny to their sheep. But no one makes a friend of a sheep any more than he would of a sixpence. They are counted over like so many sovereigns. That is all. They are fed because feeding pays. When rain fails, and the paddocks are eaten out, and the mothers are too weak to suckle, and the poor scraggy lambs stagger after them in jerks as if they were made of wire, and the stock routes are dry dust, and the crows sit along the fence--then it is just possible that if some of the mulga trees in the paddocks were cut they would save the sheep till the rain came. But scrub-cutting costs money, and the rain might not come. From one huge far outside station in the drought, a distracted manager wired to his principals: "Half flock dead of starvation." A wire came back at once: "Kill rest." And they did. The sheep as they were

were simply trampling the face of the paddock. It is said by some that the only thing to be done at such times is to let the sheep starve. But one noticed that the biggest and richest owner of all, Sir Samuel M'Caughey, always expected his managers to save all that they could.

From his lambing to the day he is executed or boiled down or starved, the sheep is just a counter in his owner's wealth. His life is simple—almost boresome. He simply feeds. Once a year—if he is not wanted for meat—he is penned up and shorn. In five minutes, when the shearer who has finished him rams him staggering and crabwise, and looking something between a goat and a badly peeled blood orange, down a slide into the counting pen beneath the wool shed, he is done with for the year.

From the moment he is lambed a sheep is either so much wool or so much meat; and wool or meat he remains until he dies, unless he strikes very evil days and becomes tallow. He is a pretty pastoral picture to the town man. But up-country they have their eyes either on his fleece or on the chops and fat and lean inside of him, and on one more than the other, according as he is to be wool or meat; occasionally on both equally. And that is—in the simplest of language—the clue to a great deal of the science of the sheep; in this way:—

You may, on a very rough average, be able to

26 On the Wool Track

make out of the wool of each sheep about 5s. each year. Your business will be to keep him alive for twelve months and then shear him, and turn him out again and repeat the process. Probably you intend to sell him after some years for what he will fetch as meat. In that case he is primarily wool and only incidentally meat.

On the other hand, it is possible to get a kind of sheep which will fatten so quickly after he is lambed that he may be sold a few months later for something like 12s. or 14s. without your having even been put to the trouble of shearing him. Sometimes it may be difficult to get him away, or the season may fail and he may be too thin, and you may shear him that year or perhaps two years, and fatten him and sell him afterwards. Each year you will get something out of his wool—it may be 4s. or 5s. But your chief aim is to fatten him and sell him to butchers or cold stores. And so in this case he is primarily meat and incidentally wool. It is an exceedingly attractive way of making good profits, and making them quick. And there has grown up a whole class of busy men in Australia whose one aim is scientifically to select and breed and nurse, so that the interior of each fat, woolly lamb may be well filled with good lean palatable meat so quickly that he may be sold to be eaten when he is four or five months old.

But it is one thing to take a fat lamb from his mother in a paddock alongside the railway line and truck him in a day to Sydney, and quite another to drive him, half-weaned, from the Paroo over a hundred miles of drought-stricken stock-route on the chance that he will survive it and die in a railway truck. For that very plain reason, whilst the "inside" stations may grow for meat if they care, the "outside" stations grow for wool. And the outside country will continue to grow wool as long as there is any outside country to do it.

Now, it so happens that the sheep which have the most mutton on them and least wool are the English ones, the short-wool sheep—the Shropshires and Southdowns—especially; and the long-wool sheep — Leicester, Border Leicesters, Lincolns, Romney Marsh sheep—to a lesser extent. And the sheep which have most wool on them and least mutton are the Spanish—the merinos—and the American Vermont sheep, which are very close to the Spanish.

The Australian sheep—there are about 100,000,000 of him—was originally bought by the King of England for his Royal farm from the King of Spain—or, some say, from the wife of the Spanish Ambassador in London—at the price of two creamy coach-horses. At least, that is the pedigree people speak about. There were some rather less noble

28 On the Wool Track

ancestors, who came through a mere Republic: they were given by the King of Spain to the Dutch Republic, and sent by the Dutch Republic to the Cape of Good Hope, and during the short spell, when the English held Cape Colony before giving it back to the Dutch, they were imported from there to Australia by Captain John Macarthur. There were also a few skinny, hairy Bengalese sheep, which came first of all—but they are not referred to in polite circles. Some of the original Australian sheep, at any rate, were undoubtedly bought by the King of England for two creamy coach horses. An old Australian Journal, *The New South Wales Magazine* of 1833 and 1834, tells why the coach horses were given.

George III. was a great experimental farmer, and he dearly wanted some Spanish merino sheep. But Spain was doing so well with merino wool that it was a crime in Spain to export Spanish rams.

However, the King got some ewes all right. A British fleet happened to pass a Spanish fleet, and by way of complimentary gifts the Spanish Admiral gave the British Admiral some sheep for sea stock. They were not eaten on board, and when the fleet arrived in England Sir Joseph Banks, the scientist, happened to see them, and as he knew what they were, he had them presented to the King.

Coach-Horses for Rams 29

But the King could not get any rams. The Spanish Ambassador was asked, but he dared not promise them. Then the lady Ambassadors was approached. She was closely watched; and it was discovered at last—on the occasion of the King's going to open Parliament—that she had a weakness for the cream-coloured horses that drew his state coaches.

The Ambassadors was at once asked if she would like a pair. They were just the thing she wanted. So two creamy coach-horses were ordered from Hanover and brought over to England for her. It cost nearly £8000 to get them to England. But when they did get there the lady Ambassadors had what no other lord or lady could boast of.

What could she do in return? The donors would accept a few Spanish sheep by way of compliment.

It was useless for the Spanish Ambassadors to ask the Spanish Government for the sheep. So the Spanish Ambassadors applied to the Spanish smugglers to select a few. They "selected" a few from various flocks, by their own well-known method of selection, and drove them through Spain and France and shipped them at Hamburg.

That is the story—on the authority only of *The New South Wales Magazine*, which tells it—of how the King of England came by his Spanish flocks. Later, in 1804, Captain John Macarthur bought

eight of them, apparently in pretty bad condition, at His Majesty's sale at Kew.

Thirty Saxon merinos were also brought from Germany in 1824. The ship *Cumberland*, Captain Cairnes commander, was chartered for the job. She brought the sheep out, sailed home, and came out again. This time Captain Cairnes, who was a widower, brought his daughter and son for the round trip. They came to Sydney and were nearly home again, crossing the Atlantic, when they were taken by pirates. The pirates put a plank out over the sea and ordered Captain Cairnes to walk along it. His son and daughter were standing by him. He caught up his daughter by the waist and jumped into the sea with her. His son jumped over the side after them.

So there is a little human romance even in the history of the merino sheep.

Between the big-framed coarse-woolled pure-bred English sheep and the little fine-woolled pure-bred merino there have been made any number of crosses. But because Australians bred their merinos and little else for a century for the sake of their wool alone, and thought seriously of those fat English lambs only quite recently when someone invented a way of sending them frozen to Europe, they have come to call every pure-bred sheep, except the fine-wool merinos and Vermonts, as well as the real

cross-bred between the two, "cross-breds." That is how a pure Shropshire, with a written pedigree that would turn even baronets green with envy, comes to be a cross-bred. Naturally, a cross between a Shropshire and a merino is also a cross-bred; but a cross between this last and a merino comes back so near to the Australian merino and so far from these interlopers, that he is called a "come-back."

The theory of cross-breeding is quite simple—much simpler than the practice. The more merino—the better for the wool, the worse for the meat. The more cross-bred—especially "Downs"—the better for the meat, the worse for the wool. Consequently on the inside stations, near the big cities and the railways, you may see nowadays, from the railway carriage windows as you pass, quite a few fat English cross-breds. But outside—on the wide, sheeny, pebble-strewn plains, where one belt of lignum half hidden in a barely appreciable depression makes the only visible feature, and throws the only visible shade, and a few of its dead twigs and wisps of grass you can almost count are the only apparent feed—the proud little sheep with big ruffles round his neck and little yolk in his wool, who lives as long as the Australian climate allows him, and dies when it doesn't—the Australian sheep, *par excellence*—is the merino.

32 On the Wool Track

Now the wool of such sheep as are not killed comes to the shearing sheds. And the wool of such as are killed, merino or cross-bred, comes mostly to Sydney on their backs, where we shall meet it later on. And that is all that it is necessary, for present purposes, to know about the sheep.

III

THE BOSS

WHEN Australians went to South Africa in the Boer War they say they found some extraordinary cattle there. They were not extraordinary really, but ordinary. They had simply been allowed to evolve themselves out of any ordinary thing that happened to be in the paddocks, or wherever South African stock is kept. It is the Australian stock which is really extraordinary.

Macarthur, who started the wool industry in Australia, when he wanted to claim something very flattering for Australian sheep, said that they had been so improved that in 1802 their fleeces had gone up in weight from $3\frac{1}{2}$ lbs. to 5 lbs. To-day there are rams in Australia with a fleece of 40 lbs. The average fleece of a good flock on a central run to-day has gone as high as $11\frac{1}{2}$ lbs. or 12 lbs. The culls—the sheep discarded as unfit to keep—on one northern station last month were expected to average 9 lbs.

34 On the Wool Track

Now, there's nothing ordinary about that. It is the result of a century of careful scientific selection by a man who understood the business. That man may have a surname and one or two Christian names of his own. But they're not in use. He has only one name up-country. He is the Boss.

It is by selecting his rams and culling heavily his ewes—discarding perhaps thirty per cent. as unfit to breed from—that the boss has manufactured an animal which did not previously exist. It was not a simple job, because heredity is not a simple thing to play with. Animals have an inconvenient way, if left to themselves for a generation or two, of reappearing in the form which their ancestors discarded centuries back—like the South African stock. Some tame pigs went wild, perhaps eighty years back, on the Lower Macquarie. There is an animal there in the reed beds still. But it is a fierce, active brute, with enormous high shoulders and light hind-quarters, with a hog's mane and a hump, that starts suddenly from his drink in the marshes, and glares up at you, gnashing till the foam flakes away from under his long curled tusks.

Let the most carefully-bred cattle run wild, and in quite a short time the old brindles re-appear amongst them. In next to no time there comes back to them the beautiful alert, head-erect stare

Playing with Heredity 35

of real wild stock. The tameness is easy enough to rub off, but the wildness is not. One stock-owner told us of a calf that he took from a wild cow in the milk and hand-fed. "But, bless you, he'd butt the bucket about the yard for want of anything better," he said. "You could always tell him afterwards when he grew up, and was feeding amongst the others. As you came near, his head would always come up with a jerk, nostrils wide, and he'd never take his wild intelligent eyes off you till long after you had passed.

"Same way with sheep. I remember two Border Leicester rams, imported from England on to a hill station. Soon after came a fall of snow in the paddocks. Not those rams, but their children, who had never seen snow, began to paw the snow away to get at the feed under it. None of the other cross-breds which were there did that."

The squatter has to discover the wool that the manufacturer thinks ideal to handle, or the leg joint—not too big at present—which the hungry man thinks ideal to eat, and to manufacture them out of the sheep which are to hand. His raw material is an animal which came to Australia from Spain chiefly, and came to Spain probably thousands of years before from Phœnicia or else-

36 On the Wool Track

where in Asia, where it probably started as a sort of curly-haired goat. If the boss is careless his sheep may be getting back towards the curly-haired goat again.

And there come in complications. Pure-bred sheep have always a stronger influence over the nature of their children than crossed sheep have. It would not be much use paying high prices for a fine Shropshire-merino ram, for example, in order to cross pure merino ewes with him, because there would be more of the pure merino than the cross-bred in those lambs, in spite of the price paid for him. Or, again, if the boss is breeding for wool, there may be more wool on the wrinkly Vermont sheep. But wrinkled sheep are said to be delicate, and the tendency is now to flatten out the wrinkles and strengthen the sheep. The boss—manager or owner—has to decide these things, and when he wants the lambing, and when to fatten and when to sell, and a thousand other things. And the boss, as a rule, does understand them.

The curious thing is that the boss is almost the only person who does understand them. There are men on the stations who see the sheep every day of their lives and handle them again and again, but apart from the manager and the overseer, it is a rare thing for a station hand even to know the ear-marks. A man who does not know the ear-

marks cannot even draft. And a man who cannot draft has not begun the elements of the science of sheep-breeding.

Perhaps there are ewes and wethers in the same paddock which have to be separated. They are mustered, driven to the drafting-yard, and penned. From this big pen down the middle of other pens leads a long narrow passage—a race, wide enough for one sheep only. Along this, one after the other, in batches, the sheep are bolted. At the end is a gate. At the gate is a man.

Now on the ear of each sheep there is a mark. If it is a ewe, it is on the right ear; if it is a wether, it is on the left. The man at the gate has to spot which it is as it bolts towards him. If it is a wether he slams across the race the gate, which bars it, and at the same time opens the way into a pen at the side. If it is a ewe he bangs the gate shut again, leaving the race clear, and shutting the pen at the side. Gradually, amidst the scuffle and the dust, and the yapping and the slam, slam of the gate, you realise that the pen at the side is filling with wethers, and the pen at the end of the race with ewes.

There are five or six sheep bolting down the race at the same time. By the time the first is at the gate a sixth is being driven into the race. The man at the gate has to catch the ear-mark of the

38 On the Wool Track

sheep farthest back. He does not watch it after that. As No. 1 comes towards him he is watching No. 2, and then No. 3 and No. 4. By the time he spots No. 5 perhaps No. 1 has reached him. He has to remember what it was, and work the gate accordingly. So he reads at least three or four or five sheep ahead—as a musician reads music.

Not only so: there may be lambs also, or two different years' sheep in the mob. If so, he can draft three lots by working two gates; or four lots by working three gates. And occasionally, drafting three lots at any rate, he will be counting one lot all the time.

Therefore drafting is an advanced art. Probably the boss learned it in his father's time, and his sons, in their turn—or his manager or overseer, who are bosses too—do it for him.

The boss is authority on a sheep station, unquestioned authority amongst men who do not readily recognise any authority at all. They are incomparably more difficult to command than any class of European. They do not pull their forelocks, or touch their hats, or even, it may be, remove their pipes. If they call him "Sir" once in each separate conversation it is enough for them. But they will do what he tells them, and often a good deal more, with a quiet resource which few

The Man in Authority 39

Europeans could compass. The boss is about the only class that has unquestioned personal authority in Australia. And it has made him distinct from all others.

When first he rode on to his country thirty or forty years back he could sit in his saddle and tie the long kangaroo grass over his horse's shoulders. It grew in the hollows chiefly, where the kangaroos fed. There was Number Nine, as thick and tough when it dried as No. 9 fencing wire; and tufts of mulga grass on the red country—which always means the high country, though country is "high" out here if it is ten feet higher than the black river soil. Best of all, on the flats there was Mitchell grass—square miles of it. There was not a fence, or a tank, or a hoof upon it; nor a rabbit.

To-day, where the mulga grass used to grow, on the edge of the red country, looking out over the black soil, built round a courtyard, shading its eyes under a deep verandah, and cuddled behind a line of stumpy native trees, is a long, low, one-story house with a shiny roof, on which you may catch the sun from ten miles away. The kangaroo grass and the Mitchell grass are gone, as often as not, and in their place is pigweed or Spanish thistle, or some rubbish brought down by the '90 flood. But there still, in some cases—in few cases out-back,

more's the pity—inside the comfortable front room, in an armchair, between the pianola and the big wood fire, with his spectacles on his forehead and the newspaper at his side, is the old boss.

For forty years, in the interval, he has risen with the kukuburra,¹ and has gone to bed with him. From the moment when the kukuburra catches sight of the first grey band on the horizon, and gives his first satisfied chuckle, to the moment when he says his last sleepy prayer to the evening star, the boss has had to move amongst strong, independent, sometimes unruly men with an unquestionable authority. He has had no immemorial feudal tradition to prop him up, or respect for his birth. Often he has had no birth to respect. If he had depended on the arm of the law to help him he would have been in a pretty bad way. For the nearest approach to the arm is one trooper, forty miles away. He knew from the first if he was to make anything of his life at all he had to depend on his common sense and courage, and the sheer ability to lead which generally exists somewhere deep down in people of British birth. And if doing

¹ There is a sober-plumed grey bird of the kingfisher tribe all through the Australian bush. He has a long chuckle by way of a call, and the natives name him the "kukuburra"—which is strangely near to the English "cuckoo." His laugh is the first sound in the bush of a morning and the last sound at night.

that—taking responsibility and command, not to speak of gain and losses, shocks and successes, unshared for forty years—did not manufacture a distinct and separate man, it is hard to say what would.

There almost always comes a time when the boss's authority is at issue; not a continental rebellion, but some mean Anglo-Saxon "try-on," with results out of all proportion. It is only natural that the strong, crude people out-back will not lie down under authority unquestioning. As often as not it will be when the boss is young, working on his father's station, or jackerooing. It may be that someone in the hut, some man that is doing the same work perhaps, will call him by his Christian name.

"Give us a hand to shift this, Jack."

That is a pure "try on." It is dropped quite casually and unexpectedly; but every man in the hut, though he mayn't appear to have heard it, is suddenly all eyes to see what will happen. Even if it occurs out on the road with no one to hear it, there is only one thing to be done, and done instantly.

"See here, Thompson," says the young boss, picking up for once the man's surname, "as long as I'm here I'm Mr M'Donald—and don't you forget it."

That may conceivably mean a fight. It is much better to avoid fighting; but there are times when it is an incalculable advantage to the boss to be able to use his hands. In one shed which we visited there had been a row. A shearer wanted to fight the overseer. It happened that the boss came along; he was not a big man, but he could fight like a game-cock, and people knew it.

"I'll have no fighting in the shed," he said quietly to the shearer, "and you can leave Mr Jeffries alone. If you want to fight, and care to come outside, I can accommodate you."

But the shearer did not want. He took his cheque and went.

Can anyone doubt that there are the makings of a grand man in this life? There is no chance for anything kid-gloved. We called at one beautiful home in the north-west, a house full of the luxuries of the city, of the latest books and papers, connected with a telephone, lighted with gas. In sight of the drawing-room, far over the rich plain, was a distant streak of water.

Once or twice in a year, when rain falls on certain hills on the horizon, they find that certain creeks and channels and billabongs are quietly filling. Of a sudden, on one corner of the run, you can hear a rustle—almost a low roar. It is the river that has begun to flow down a certain back-

water which wanders for miles around the country and back to the river again. As the water rises it cuts off strips of high ground into islands. Twenty or thirty kite-hawks gathered from somewhere are fluttering and screeching over something that is being cut off and drowned. Rabbits and paddy-melons¹ are crowded on the gradually shrinking islands until there are only fallen tree-trunks left showing, with the rabbits creeping along them exactly as tin ones do in a shooting gallery. Rabbits can swim all right until they turn. And bullocks can generally cross that water. But sheep get cut off and will not try.

Now, at those times it is all in the day's work to ride to the billabong, swim your horse across the water, and get the sheep out. Also, in order to get into town there are actually three deep streams—one of them wide and flowing fast—to swim your horse across. You step almost from the door of that homestead into a gully down which is running a deep swollen river. The boys who live in that beautiful house think no more about crossing three watercourses than they do of a game of billiards. But the refinement of home with a tonic like this provided outside the door of it has had something to do with turning out the boss.

¹ About the smallest sort of kangaroo.

44 On the Wool Track

There is no refinement which comes as quite such a surprise to one in these back corners of the State as the telephone. We arrived one day after a fifty-mile drive on a route along which only one boundary rider lived—and he was not at home—at the back station of a big Darling run. The station fronted on the Darling River about sixty miles away. But the owner happened to be making a round trip, and he drove up a few minutes after we did. They were naturally not expecting any travelling city man out there, but it is a way they have in the West, when a stray visitor's buggy-horse puts his head over the gate, to look as if they had been expecting him for months; and there being only one spare bedroom the city man shared it with the owner.

At the end of dinner the boss pushed back his chair and took it across to the telephone on the wall at his back. He sat down under the telephone, settled himself comfortably with the receiver, and then proceeded to have an after-dinner yarn with his sister, who was at another of his stations somewhere down the river, across one hundred and thirty miles of telephone wire. It was not a mere dialogue. That boss owns some five stations this side of the Darling and the other, and somebody at one or two, at least, of the other stations was joining in that chat. There may be thirty or fifty

miles between two stations, and the different stations in between act as telephone exchanges for the various lines that branch off them to the out stations. It appears that every night at the same hour—about dessert time if there were any dessert to be had—the boss sits down and winds up the day with that little scrap of sociability.

Sometimes the top wire of a fence is used for a telephone line. But as this wire usually becomes useless when it is most needed—in wet weather or in bush fires—they do not often trust to it nowadays.

The boss differs altogether from the reputed English aristocrat in that he's not afraid to talk about his trade. Why should he be? He has given his life to it. The up-country Australian is the most capable man, probably, in the Anglo-Saxon races. Because he has not had the proper materials he has learnt to make shift with any materials. But he has also learnt a terrible way of leaving a thing when it is "near enough."

The boss started life with a motto: "Near enough is not good enough for me," and for forty years he has made his men work up to it. It may nowadays be only a small "inside" station, for the day of big "inside" runs is gone, and the day seems to be coming of little stations, four thousand to ten thousand acres in good country, exceedingly

46 On the Wool Track

well managed, so that two sheep can feed where one before. The fences are well kept, the gates strong, the paddocks clean. It is incalculable how the station hands will learn from a station like that. The share farms which spring up on it should be models compared with those on a slackly managed run.

So the boss has grown, not ashamed to do a deal in the light of day, to drive over the paddocks with an agent and a buyer, and fence and parry and fix up a shrewd sale after lunch; and to talk shop no end. If you visit an Australian station it is about even chances you find the boss driving over some buyer to have a look at the sheep in a back paddock. It has not always been fair weather. Indeed, out West the rule has been disaster—typically Australian disaster, because nothing happened, but it simply did not rain. The stock went on feeding, and the grass went on dying, and the stock routes became dustier and dustier, until one critical day came. You could not always tell when it came, often not till after it had gone, but it came and went all the same—the day when the stock route was passable for the last time, and the sheep had still strength to get away if the boss so chose.

The boss can hardly be blamed for not choosing. It was a big expense and a big risk. Big

ragged clouds were flying low down over the country, and it might rain to-morrow. So the chance went by. The sheep stayed. And presently grass ran out. The boss bought feed for his horses and paid men to cut scrub for his sheep. Then the money ran out too.

It was no good ruining himself to keep the sheep alive and then letting them die when they were his only asset. It might rain to-morrow. So the boss borrowed and went on. In the end, when the stock had trampled out the roots of most of the grass, and then had mostly died, the mortgagees came in and took the station. Sometimes they left the boss as manager. But the men who owned "outside" runs before the drought, and who own the same runs still, may almost be counted on the fingers.

The boss has not always been a good man. There have been men, no doubt, living on the fringe of settlement whose deeds will never be told if only because those who knew of them would not have the courage to tell them. One very old pioneer on the Darling said to us: "I sometimes think the drought came upon the squatters as a retribution for some of the wickedness that has been done."

But there have been black sheep even among bishops; and amongst bishops there have not been more upstanding, God-fearing, strong, frank, generous,

magnificent men than there have been and still are amongst the squatters of New South Wales. The turn of the wheel has crushed a proportion of the older ones. But that is a dismal tale, and there is no call to be dismal just now, when most of the West here is looking like a wheatfield. Droughts notwithstanding, inside and out it is an immensely prosperous, great country. And the old boss, though he took shock after shock when he had to, with the dignity and pluck of a French aristocrat, is often enough left, in the evening of his days, to watch the kukuburras from the homestead he has built.

"My old friends," he calls them. "There are four of 'em," he tells you, "that sit on a bough right opposite my window. One chap every day sees the grey in the sky even before I do. He lets go a chuckle half an hour before the rest. . . ."

The boss knew him there before the run was fenced. He has heard him first in the morning when as a youngster he used to camp on the Namoi bank, waiting on the flood to cross with stock from Queensland. He has heard him last at night on the Murrumbidgee, when the camp-fire lit up the gaunt arms of ring-barked river gums which no fire could burn. Slow of speech, great of limb, courteous, understanding of men, a lover of animals

The Setting of the Sun 49

—conservative though he may be, aristocrat though he undoubtedly is in fact, whatever he may be in name—his day's work out with the kukuburra has made of him probably the finest type of all Australians, and the simplest. He asks for no better requiem than that of his old friend when it comes to the setting of the sun.

IV

BEFORE THE PADDOCKS

EVEN the tradition of them has almost gone from the "inside" country. And yet most of us have some half-forgotten childish recollection of a tall gaunt figure in a long frayed overcoat, a shabby felt hat half hiding the sunken cheeks, and thin grey beard and hard lines drawn as with a ruler across his face. One can see the round backs of a hundred sheep feeding in the hollow below him. And still as a statue on the hill there, the ragged edges of his overcoat showing against the yellow sky, with his stick and his pipe and his dog—the old man himself. With no other companions, he lived year in and year out—twenty, thirty, forty miles from the homestead. Once in three weeks or more a cart would turn up with his rations. But seeing men so seldom, he came not to wish to see them—a "hatter" they called him for his madness. That man was the Shepherd.

In the days when there was not a fence from

the Darling to the Indian Ocean, and two thousand miles square of Australia was exactly as Providence and the blackfellow had left it, the men who crossed the borders of settled country and came out on to the plains could let their cattle scratch more or less for themselves, as they still do in the Gulf. But sheep had to be watched day and night for fear—amongst other fears—of the native dog.

Few people realise that that stage, which is prehistoric in the East, existed only the other day—well within memory—along the Darling. A week or two back, driving in a Dunlop paddock about eleven miles the other side of the Darling, winding through what looked like an open park of budda and emu bush and leopardwood, where daisies and short herbage, and perhaps some never-fail, grew fairly well between the trees, we found ourselves suddenly out upon a patch about the size of a tennis court as brilliant and soft and close as a square of rich green carpet.

When you come on that sort of thing in the West you look for the cause. This delicate country responds like a piano to whatever touches it. Nearer the river there had been a similar carpet on a patch of brick-red earth—which shows where long ago, in the first days of pioneer settlement across the Darling, the woolshed of the Bogan

52 On the Wool Track

River Company, with Heaven knows how many bales of wool inside it, burned and smouldered for months, or perhaps years. You may still pick up there certain chunks of light igneous purple rock not unlike lava. They are not rocks really; they are all that is left of the Bogan Company's wool.

But there is no second woolshed back here. That square green court marks out, as clearly as if it were coloured on a map, the lines within which some forgotten shepherd penned his sheep night after night from the dogs and the natives in the days when the land across the Darling was almost no man's land. Not far away is a half-buried sheet of iron, which was once his tank.

We met on the Darling one who had been a shepherd in his youth. He had to be a shepherd because he was sent to work with relations, and was put at the lowest work and the lowest wage. And he told us how, after he had penned his sheep of an evening and turned into the little tent that fluttered pink in the night behind the fire-glow in a very lonely paddock near the Lachlan (the ration cart came to him only once in five or six weeks), as he was dozing into sleep about nine or ten o'clock, there would come from out of the night a long, dreary howl.

"Curious thing is, they'd always sit down outside the pen and howl whilst they were thinking of it," he said.

All is quiet as death again for an hour and a half. Then, without any warning, comes a scamper—rushes of sheep in the pen. That means he is over the fence and amongst them at last. The shepherd jumps up and shouts, and the scatter stops. The dog is out of it like the wind—will not come back for an hour or two.

"It was generally enough to sing out," he says. "Sometimes you might have to pick up a fire-stick."

One night on the run a shepherd had to leave his pen. Probably the cart had not come round, and he was short of food. That night a dog killed forty sheep. A dog has no cold store. He did not kill forty sheep for a meal, but for pure devilment. At most he would tear off the wool and take a kidney or liver, to which by some unaccountable instinct the dogs knew the way, almost before they knew a sheep by sight. Little wonder there was work for the shepherd.

They were men almost wild—often "old hands." "They feared neither God nor man," one pioneer told us. "One of my shepherds stole a horse and

54 On the Wool Track

started off to join Thunderbolt, the bushranger. I caught him on the way and sent him to be tried. In due course a policeman was sent down the Darling to serve subpœnas on the witnesses. He was the first policeman ever sent down the Darling; and he was in uniform. He came to my place—Gundabooka.

“It happened I had to go over the river to see Mr Bloxham at Toorale homestead, a day or two later. He said of all his men he had only one or two left. The rest had disappeared. They had heard of a policeman coming. A bush signal had preceded him somehow. The blacks at Gundabooka had cleared in a body. I suppose some got to Toorale and told the blacks there.”

That was the effect of a policeman on the Darling River in 1864.

And then came the fencers and tank-sinkers. For perhaps twenty years the West seethed with them. A whole ocean of capital poured in on their heels and spread over the land as the Paroo spreads in flood-time. Busy towns were made—little else really than centres for fencing and tank-sinking—which did not know what made them, and thought they would live in that whirl for ever. And then the fencers and tank-sinkers went. The towns entered their second childhood. The country was quiet again. But it was not

the same endless unfettered West on to which those men had gone out. They had left it in chains.

There are dogs, though it is not generally known, on the hills thick enough to-day not one hundred miles from Sydney. There are dogs by the hundred across the border in South Australia. In almost all far Western runs there is a dingo or two in the back paddocks. But a man is generally kept dogging, and the boundary rider gets a few pounds out of occasional scalps. There was a time when a scalp meant the two ears of a dog and the forehead between. They paid £1 for each scalp. In those days a Chinaman came to a certain run out-back. He asked to be taken on as dogger. They engaged him, and he disappeared for the time being, out into one of the far paddocks. Presently he brought in a scalp; and then another and another, and then scalps every week. Nobody knew there were many dogs about; nobody else saw them. But the Chinaman was bringing in whole mobs of scalps. In the end someone examined the scalps. They found that when he killed one dog he manufactured about twenty scalps out of him—ears and all. They were fine art. But after that they altered the rule. A scalp since that date has meant a strip of skin cut from the tip of the nose right down the back to the tail.

You cannot manufacture two backbones out of one dog.

It is these doggers that deal with the wild dogs nowadays. The sheep have a fence to keep them in place of a man. The work of the shepherd is gone; and with it—as will happen to any of the others when their work ceases—is utterly vanished and gone the shepherd.

V

WHEN FENCES CAME

THE sheep has a fence to look after him nowadays. Strictly speaking, the place of the shepherd is taken by a post and rail. But in so far as his mantle has fallen on any human being it has fallen on the man who looks after the fence—and he is the boundary rider.

On inside runs the boundary rider is nothing at all like the shepherd. He lives in civilisation and may see the homestead every day or two. Even if he does not, he has a cottage, and often a wife and family and a cow and pumpkins, and other luxuries. On a station near Wellington, for example, four out of five boundary riders are married men. Their paddocks run from twelve acres to two thousand or three thousand. They look after five or six paddocks each.

Now a boundary rider in paddocks like that may see almost all his sheep every other day. He can even attend to any particular sheep which

58 On the Wool Track

seems dejected or apart. That is what a boundary rider can do on stations only three or four hundred miles from Sydney.

“Outside” there are paddocks, too. Pretty well all Australia is paddocks now. But the average Western paddock contains one hundred square miles. You could put half London into it, suburbs included. If one fence is on the horizon behind, the other is over the horizon ahead. You could walk till you died in that paddock without seeing a fence. Lost men have before now found the fence and died alongside of it before it led them anywhere.

It is no good pretending to attend to dejected sheep in a paddock like that. There may be a hut in each paddock with a boundary rider—sometimes two, living together. Every day except Sunday the boundary rider is expected to be out in his paddock. It is forty miles round the fence. He may ride the western fence to-day and home through the middle of the paddock; and the eastern fence to-morrow. About one day in two he may spot something like a line of posts, which is probably a line of sheep in mirage on the horizon. Occasionally he cuts through a wing of them. He sees a man, or gets a mail, perhaps, once in three weeks.

The night before last we were making for a tank

—German tank on the corner of Manfred run; we were not sure we should hit the place or whether there would be anyone there if we did. There had been an old back station at the tank. But the tank went dry years ago. About sundown we hit the horse paddock and drove through it up the deserted drive past the deserted house and over the rise at the back, towards where we knew—they had told us thirty miles away—we should find a well.

We knew where the well must be, a mile before we got to it. They had knocked down the fence in one paddock, and lines of sheep and lambs were stringing across the plain, kicking up ghostly white dust devils as they went, straight for the water. Then the black woodwork of the whim showed up against the yellow sky, and, in front of the whim, a hut, and out of the hut came two men.

They came out and stood there smoking as if they had watched us go out at morning and come back every night for the last month. They were just going to have their tucker. They didn't ask who we were, but they asked us to come in and have some—brownie and mutton and tea with condensed milk in it. They apologised for the cooking and gave up one of the beds—would not hear of doing anything else,—and slept on the floor. The bed was a wooden frame with tin nailed across

60 On the Wool Track

it, packing to lie on, and a spare rug. It was one of the luxuries.

Those men, who had the courtesy of kings, were boundary riders. They were a young man and an older man. They had finished their day's work. One noticed that the younger had carefully shaved and brushed himself up after it.

It was a very lonely corner, and they were only out there because the sheep were being watered at this well. They said the foxes were coming about pretty thickly; as a matter of fact we had seen four or five that day. And that night as we stood in the lamp-glow outside the door of the hut, forty miles out on Manfred run, far over the paddock came a shrill, querulous cough. Then another and another, the last quite loud and near. Five times that night came those wheezy barkings, first very far, then a little closer. Then silence. One watched the red fire-glow flicker on the roof beams; a few minutes later the lambs, camped around the trough of the well outside, began to bleat; and the dogs to growl louder and fiercer. One knew he was out there drinking at the trough. A little later the bark came from the distance again, growing fainter.

Nowadays, far more often than of old, boundary riders are sent out in pairs, as these were, or even three together, under an overseer. But for all that,

Sunday at the Hut 61

the solitary boundary rider, who has no mate to civilise him, is still the rule rather than the exception. Now that man in some ways comes very close to the shepherd. Drive, any Sunday, from the back station, thirty miles to White Dog Paddock, in the corner of the run. After driving half a day around the edge of a depression with a skin of crisp, shiny salt—which it has pleased geographers to paint blue, and call a lake,—having sighted nothing more like stock than a mob of disappearing emus, and the lonely descendant of some forgotten black cat poaching in a rabbit burrow, you come over the top of a red sandhill face to face with what you realise, when you have picked it out from the background, to be a tiny, dun-coloured log-hut. There is the enormous wooden whim of an old well at the back of it, and a low trough, which holds the only water in one hundred square miles, and precious little at that. Also there is a small horse paddock. In paddocks one hundred miles large a man must be able to catch water, and he must be able to catch a horse, or he will not be able to live. Outside the hut, a shiny black kelpie slut wagging her tail at his knee, a pipe in his mouth, his head bent over some work you cannot see, is a man.

Away in the cities, amongst the great churches and skyscrapers, men have ceased work for Sunday.

62 On the Wool Track

And right through the bush, even with these lonely men, each in the middle of his own little sahara, where they have to reckon out which day Sunday is, everyone is spelling too.

In Sydney they have put on top hats, and are coming from church to an over-large dinner. This man has shaved in two and a half angular inches of broken looking-glass, propped on a pot of golden syrup; and has since been putting handles on to jam tins.

It is three weeks since that man had the chance of talking to anything except his dog. Yet he barely lifts his head and nods.

“Good day!”

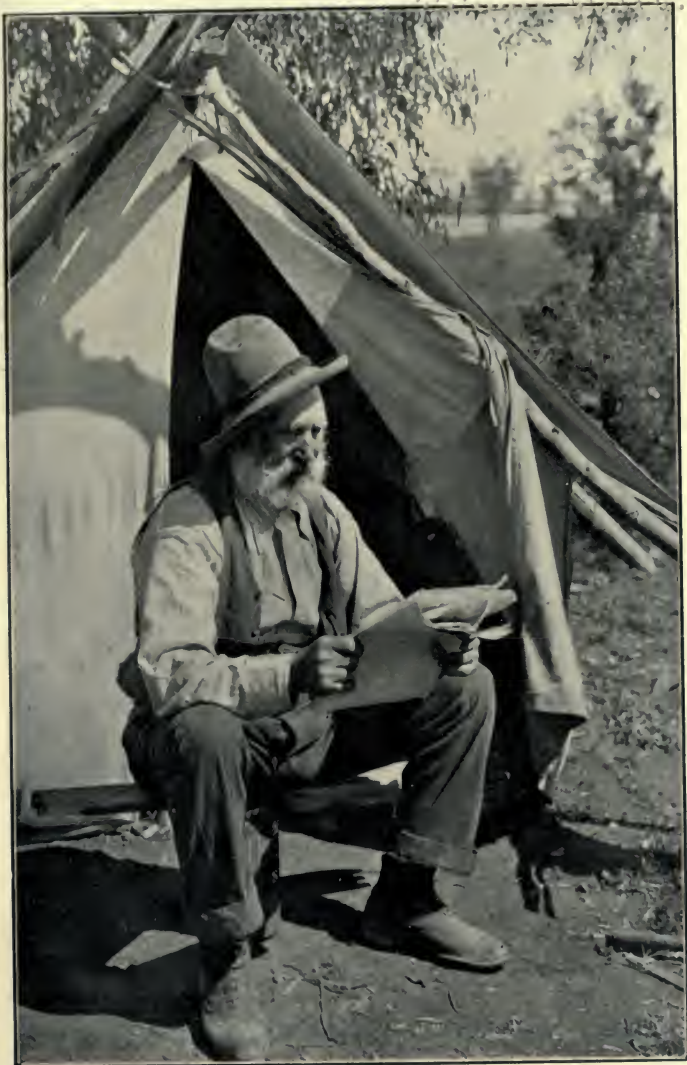
In the dark of the hut, over drowsy grey embers, in the ship's tank of a fireplace, dangles a billie.

“You'll have some tea,” he says.

He is delicately thoughtful in attending to you. But beyond a desultory remark about the weather, or the sheep, there is no conversation at all. He seems to be living in a dream, far out there with the mirage.

Yet he is probably a well-read man. The hut is piled and papered with old newspapers. Every book that comes along he devours from cover to cover.

At one or two of the huts we passed they had not had a mail or a newspaper or a glimpse of the



[Facing p. 62.]

THEY READ THE WEEKLY PAPERS TO THE ADVERTISEMENTS
ON THE BACK COVER.



outside world for three weeks. The consequence was they seized on any papers we brought as if they were hungry. They assumed we should want the precious budget back again. "Can I have the loan of this for a bit?" a man would ask. Then he would go off with it and curl up like a dog with a bone. I believe they read the weekly papers to the advertisements on the back cover.

In every hut there were three weekly papers—the *Sydney Mail*, the *Australasian*, and the *Worker*; the *Adelaide Observer* as well in those near the river; generally a *Bulletin*, and in one *The Ladies' Home Journal*. Sometimes a Byron or Shakespeare or Gordon is there. But we found mostly Nat Gould's racing novels, in paper cover. On the back of one was the publisher's list of twenty-eight Nat Gould stories; twenty-five were ticked off in pencil—they had been read.

It is almost like prying into the privacy of a man's mind to look into the dark simple interior of these huts as you come on one of them perched in some far corner of some great empty run as big as an English county. Some solitary man lives there for months together, without leaving his paddocks, and the hut is simply the shell of him. Solid log walls, the fire-place an old ship's tank, two beds of flat tin, a sack of flour, several bottles of sauce, and a tin of "cocky's joy."

Cocky's¹ joy is golden syrup in 2-lb. tins, costing sevenpence—four times as cheap as jam and six times as portable. Every boundary rider's camp is littered with half-eaten tins of it. They are witty at the expense of it, and yet they cherish it too. Here is a bushman's description of the climax of misery: "When I got back to my camp," he said, "it had been raining. My tent had blowed down, and my fire was put out. There was a wet kangaroo dog in my blanket, a crow had run off with my soap, and my cocky's joy was full of ants."

The people out-back read everything—read far more than the men in the towns. "A man must read out there—or drink," one told us. Occasionally he will scribble down some hazy thought. Scrawled in pencil on the corrugated iron door of one hut we found: "Nero fiddled whilst Rome burned." One could not help wondering what happened out there, what Nature or the manager had done or left undone, to make that thought worth putting down.

¹ A "cocky" is a small farmer. He usually selects himself a three-hundred- or five-hundred-acre holding, clears it, fences it, pays for it, ploughs it, sows wheat in it—and then goes to bed to wait for his crop. The next morning he gets up and finds the paddock white with cockatoos grubbing up his seed. He is there to plough and sow and reap—cockatoos. And that, they say, is how he got the name of a cockatoo farmer—a cocky.

Most of the scribbling in these huts is done by visitors, not the owner. Once a year, for a month or two, on horses, on bicycles, occasionally on foot, come by the "travellers," shearers on their way from shed to shed. It may be the track leads them through the paddock by the hut. When the owner is there he helps them; when he is away they help themselves. They are city-bred and vulgar, and their particular joke is to use his tin door or chimney for a visitors' book. "The jam was good, and the mutton excellent," "A home from home," "William Smith (Balmain) and George Kelly (Rozelle), cycling to Tolarno, found everything clean and food good." "Strongly recommend this house to thirsty travellers."

There is a story of one man who was known because of his personal habits as Slimy Sam. He lived in a hut near the track. One day he came back to his hut, and found writing on the door of it. It struck Sam that it might be an important message. Unfortunately, he could not read. So Sam took the door off its hinges, carried it five miles to a hotel along the road, and had the message read. It was: "Slimy Sam, of Mumblebone, was the dirtiest beggar ever known."

But except for a few "hatters," who live a score of years in the same very back paddock, boundary riders can read. They have nothing to spend their

66 On the Wool Track

money on; but, out-back, at any rate, hardly anyone saves it. In practically every case it goes the same way as nearly all the money made by station hands in the Far West. Even "inside," when a boundary rider saves his money, he sometimes hardly knows what to do with it. An old chap we heard of—a man born in the old country—had worked for about twenty years on the same run, and made a good pile. One day he came up to the owner.

"I see they reckon the King's goin' to be crowned next year, sir," he said.

"Yes, Joe," said the unsuspecting boss.

"I've always been a loyal man. I guess I must go and see 'im."

The boss nearly lost his breath; only, being an Australian, he took out his pipe.

"Supposing I said no," he suggested.

"By G—— I think I'd leave you. I've got to go."

And he did. He was not married. It was as good a use for his money as any other, and he came back when he had spent it.

The face of their paddock is an open book to these men. They read riddles from every scratch that man or animal has made on it. All the time you are driving through this country the driver is watching the ground at his side—as well as everything else within view and a good deal that is out

Even Boundary Riders may Fail 67

of view to most city people. "There's a couple of dogs been through here," he says occasionally; or, "That's where he camped—the footman who come this way from Mumblebone." Yet even to them a day comes when this country will all but beat them. One of the best bushmen we met told us that he had been riding north of Broken Hill along a road to Purnamoota, which, if one remembers the story aright, he had been told was the sort of road he could not miss. He started in the morning, and about evening the road split itself up into a dozen tracks, straggling into ranges. It was a woodcutter's track. He had had nothing to drink and little to eat. Night was coming on.

That is the time a paralysing fear takes hold of a man. But he had the sense to go back along the road till he came to another road crossing it. Desperately he turned off along this. Presently ahead of him he saw a spark. As he came up to it he found it was the light from a hut. A man was standing outside. But he scarcely noticed him. What he saw was a trough—and he rushed to it and fairly plunged his head into it side by side with his horse. Afterwards he found that he had just happened to strike a woodcutter's hut. It was fortune saved that bushman.

The fashion is coming in of grouping the boundary riders under overseers at centres about

68 On the Wool Track

the run. The "hatter" may go; but someone still rides the fences; and this is the man who, as far as they can be said to be looked after, looks after the sheep during the year. And what happens to the sheep during the year is recorded in the wool almost as on a barometer. A week ago, watching the wool-classer in Dunlop shed, one saw him take a tuft from one fleece and tug the two ends of it. It came slowly apart. Down the middle of that tuft ran a line of shade. There was a thinness in it at that point.

Now that tuft was actually a record of the history of the sheep since the last shearing. The line of shadow where the wool tore—a "break in the wool"—showed that at one stage of the year the sheep became so poor that the wool ceased to grow. Probably the feed had become bad. Afterwards rain came, or the sheep were put on to another paddock, and the fleece grew again. For the paddock has an immense effect on the wool. The sheep that have been feeding in the back paddocks on the red sand of the real Australia come in looking utterly different from those that have been on the modern river soil on a Darling frontage. The sheep carries the evidence of each separate paddock into the wool-shed. The wool-classer could tell you.

And not only he. A London clubman on

The Effect on the Wool 69

Piccadilly pavement works from his sleeve a small irritating lump. The next minute in his hand there lies, blinking up at this unfamiliar London sun, a wee, shiny, much-bleached stranger. The probability is he would grow if they planted him. They would not know that the slender plumes that raised themselves among the fat English grasses had wrestled for an æon or two through the dust of Winbar or Kallara or Momba or some other famous run. Probably it would not thrill them if they did know it.

But an Australian would understand.

VI

ON THE MOUNTAINS

ON the verandah of a certain north-western homestead there is a big telescope. Probably it was not put there for the purpose of observing wild animals. It was a fascinating thing to do, nevertheless. You could with pleasure put in an afternoon watching the hares crawling like fleas across the drowsy shimmering plain, humping their hindquarters in the way hares have as they move from feed to feed. One picked up near the hares a solitary magpie, stalking through the grass, pecking, looking round on the world, patiently soliloquising. Then one lifted the glass on to a very far range of blue hills.

They would have been steep hills to climb. But the glass saved the trouble. One could see the great boulders on them winking with the heat; the threads of watercourses creeping between; the soft woolly tufts of gumtree and hopbush. On the very highest hump of the bald summit was the "trig."

The hills were as hazy as a washed-out water-colour. If there were any sound there, of course one could not hear it.

There are no sheep on those hills, and no fences. The back paddocks of the holdings around run up to the foot of them, and stop there. That back fence is worth noticing. Over the top of the narrow meshed wire netting which—as someone has said—divides one rabbit from another, is another netting with a mesh through which you could shovel whole families of rabbits. That fence would not keep out the biggest buck rabbit that ever lived, and a fox would climb up the posts like a cat and jump off them again were they twice as high. The special enemy against which the fence is a fortification is not rabbit, nor fox, nor emu, nor kangaroo. He is the dingo.

For somewhere about that hillside, if one could only have seen them, are still swarms of the nearest approach that Australia has to a wolf. He is more like a jackal in some ways; only the jackal hunts in packs and the dingo very seldom does. He may live with a pack, but when you see him hunting it is by himself, a single tawny patch flashing low like a streak of lightning through the grass. There is no mistaking a dingo. A fox is tawny, too. But a fox is small, and lopes along heavily as though his tail were too big for him,

and turns round to look at you every few moments like a cat. We were in several districts where the fox is just appearing, and in each case the people who saw him for the first time thought he was a cat.

The sheep do not seem afraid of a fox any more than the rabbits do of the wild cats, which appear to live in the same burrows with them. It is just possible that the cats do draw the line at poaching in their own burrow. But more probably they kill quietly, without unnecessary fuss, and when the others are mostly away—just as a fox does. We saw one fox quietly shepherding a mob of sheep. A few miles further on, by the side of the track, were two lambs, lost and bleating piteously. They were probably too far off for their mothers to hear them. But somebody else may have. The flock had nothing to fear from their shepherd. One would not care to say the same about the lambs.

Foxes and rabbits were both introduced for the fun of chasing them. Australians have had plenty of chasing. As a sport, rabbit-shooting wore out, many years ago. And the foxes promise to become a fine pest.

There have been doubts as to whether foxes kill sheep; but the experience of people in the Australian Alps settles that. The foxes came

first from Victoria three years ago. They took possession of the rabbit burrows and lived on young rabbits. The fox could hear them crying as he went over the top of the burrow and dug down to the sound, not the scent. Since then burrows have been dug up, and around the fox cubs were lying sometimes twenty or thirty dead lambs. I spoke to a squatter at Mount Kosciusko who had seen this himself, and who when he found his sheep mysteriously killed had poisoned the last carcase, and found two dead foxes there next morning.

Still, a fox has not the size or strength of a dog. But a dingo is a dog and no mistake; a handsome dog, in some ways a good dog. He still clings tenaciously to odd corners of the mountains, from which men cannot yet and perhaps never will be able to root him out. And he makes the biggest mountain masses in Australia more or less unlivable for sheep.

There is one comparatively small upland which is regularly used for sheep pasture because the grass is good there in dry summers when the plains are dust. These are the Snow Leases around Mount Kosciusko. The Australian snow-field is not plastered fathoms thick over mountain tops, like the snows of the Pyrenees. Providence did not lay it on with a putty-knife. Banjo

Patterson's blackfellow explained exactly what Providence did—"Shake him big flour-bag, tumbled over snow."

Providence dusted the uplands of Australia as with castor sugar, dusted them thickly, but did not plaster them. When that snow melts away they send up their sheep from the plains about the Murray and Murrumbidgee Rivers—the Riverina. They always intend to bring them down again before the snow falls. They do not always manage it. They give their mountains picturesque names up in the Snow Leases. One peak is called the Perisher. There are at this time of writing a hundred and thirty sheep snowed in behind the Perisher. They are in one of the gullies. They were left too late. The snow blew over the neck of the hills. Men have been trying to get them out this past week, and have given it up and come away. The sheep may work down to the Snowy River through some gap unknown. They have been found, on one occasion at least, still living huddled in a sort of snow cave apparently formed by the warmth of their bodies under the lee of a big rock. But for the most part the stock and horses cut off behind the Perisher have perished. The bones of them are there in places six deep.

Down the wild valleys in the Snow Leases there

The Astronomers' Dogs 75

still wander plenty of dingoes, and the sheep up here are still shepherded. Some time since, when an observatory was built on the summit of Mount Kosciusko and the astronomers went up there to stay the whole winter, being men of science and not bushmen they were not very confident about finding their way home to the summit when the snow should come down, covering the hut yards deep and the fog covering everything else. But a bright idea struck one of them. "When people are lost in the Alps," he said, "a Saint Bernard dog comes along with a little flagon round his neck and carries them home. We will take up some Saint Bernards too." So they took up a pair. The snow covered the hut feet deep, and the men had to climb up a sort of chimney to get out. When the shepherds came along to call they saw the two great dogs on the snow outside and they were not at all enthusiastic. The astronomers assured them that they needn't be frightened; the dogs would not harm a cat, much less a man or a sheep.

"But," as one of the men put it afterwards, "you see it wasn't exactly them we was frightened of. We knew they was quiet enough. But we didn't exactly look forward to 'aving a race of half-breed St Bernards prancing round the mountains. . . ."

The St Bernards are said to have disappeared shortly afterwards. They were not replaced.

For all these reasons such wool as does come from the mountains in Australia would barely be worth even this short mention were it not that, such as it is, it is in part responsible for two of the most typically Australian of all the producers in the wool industry. The first is the Australian horseman.

The sheep is only in part responsible for him. It is the cattle, that can live where sheep cannot, that have given Australia perhaps the most astonishing riders the world contains. And it is to a great extent those same dingoes that are responsible for the cattle. Cattle do better than sheep in the hills for many other reasons, but perhaps chiefly because they are too big for a dingo to tackle. Dingoes will kill a young calf or two. But even a calf is a big job for them. One Darling pioneer told us that the only time he had seen the dogs going in packs like wolves was in the very early days when first he came out on the country with cattle, almost before the days of sheep. He thought the dogs hunted in packs then because a calf was more than they cared to tackle alone.

It may have been so, for the dingoes seem to have been afraid of any big thing. In all my trip

I did not come upon even a single yarn of a dog attacking a man, nor anyone that heard of one. One north-countryman said that, riding on a lonely Queensland track from one Western run to another, he had found a dingo following him. It followed him all day, running quite close on to the heels of his packhorse, turning up now on one side of them, now on the other. It was uncanny. But he put it down simply to the smell of a pair of hobbles which he had newly cut from raw hide and was carrying with him.

In any case, the dingo was not after him. For even with young calves, the number that dingoes will kill is so small that the owners are sometimes content to ignore them. I actually heard of one cattle station, not so very far from civilisation either, where the owner would not shoot a dingo if he could help it. The dogs were fairly thick there a year or two back, so thick that the stockmen hardly took any notice of them. There were a few paddymelons and wallabies. But a rabbit had never been seen there until the beginning of this century, when a few of the usual isolated ominous reports of them began to come in.

"Me keep down the dogs?" said the owner. "Not much. The more the better." He was not going to keep down dogs in order to have to keep down rabbits and paddymelons instead.

All of which digression merely goes to show one of the many reasons why it is cattle more than sheep that are found in the Australian highlands. But the point of it here is that this work on the mountains, amongst cattle and sheep, too, has evolved in Australia a certain race of horsemen, than which the world has certainly never seen better—and perhaps never the equal.

It is one thing to gallop across the flat country, even if it is rotten with rabbit holes, and quite another thing to hurl yourself as fast as your horse can race down a steep gully side, covered with stones so loose that your mates, waiting a mile and a half away on another hillside, can actually hear the roar and the rattle of you.

Even people in the Australian cities have no idea of the feats that go for nothing in the day's work in the mountains. It is the literal truth that Australian city folk look on as travellers' tales incidents that in the bush are often not thought worthy of mention. A man may be flinging himself and his horse down a valley, when he finds before him, instead of mountain grass, twenty feet of smooth granite rock. Before he knows where he is, as in a flash of lightning, he realises that his horse is sliding over the surface of it like a school-boy across a frozen pond, only to fall into stride without any apparent check on the other side. Or

With the "Gold Escort" 79

up in the north, whirling along a hilltop amongst paddymelon holes—which, whether the paddymelon really makes them or not, are uncomfortable little pitfalls, nearly a yard deep—he finds that the mare, by one of those wonderful efforts which mountain-bred horses will sometimes make, has put her forefoot into one of them, and come out again without slackening. There are stockmen and stockmen; but the odds are, a Queensland stockman or an old Monaro hand will not think those incidents worth repeating. A Sydney man would not believe them.

Years ago, at a European health resort, a magnificent old Englishman, by name De Courcy Hamilton, a soldier himself, and the uncle of a famous general, was speaking of the time just before the Crimean War when he himself was in command of the "gold escort" which took the gold from the Victorian diggings to the sea. And he told how in those days he had seen an Australian sit a horse whilst it bucked the saddle up to its shoulders and close up to its neck, until, with a final wriggle, it flung the saddle, with the girth unbroken, clear of its neck and forefeet, and bucked its rider right over its head with the saddle still between his knees.

Australians to whom the story was afterwards told have said it was impossible for a horse to fling the saddle over his neck and forefeet without break-

ing the girth. On the other hand, at least six Australians told us that they had seen a horse do it. A city man is pretty bold who puts a limit to what Australian horses and Australian horsemen—the mountain ones, at any rate—can do, merely on the strength of its seeming impossible. An Englishman would hardly understand that the orthodox and sporting way to kill a fox is to ride him down until you can free your right stirrup and run the iron to the end of the leather, and kill him with that as you whisk through scrub and over fallen trees, before he dodges into a hollow stump, if you can.

“An’ that’s the best way to finish a dog, too, Mister,” they will tell you. “Chase him into a log and put a fire into it. You can kill him as he comes out. You ’ave to be ready for him. But it’s won’erful what a lot of fire they’ll stand, an’ chances are ’e’ll be stupid with the smoke before ’e comes out. Runnin’ him down with a stirrup iron is not so ’ard as you might think. One crack steadies ’im. Give ’im one or two to go on with and you can get off and kill him walking. Not but what they’re terrors to finish. I’ve seen a dog left lyin’ for dead at night with his head bashed in. But he’d got up and walked off before the morning.”

The work the horseman used to do in the

mountains, with sheep at any rate, he is doing less and less. There is another producer in the wool industry who does it better.

It may be a question who produces the wool of Australia. Most people allow that the owner has a hand in it, who breeds the sheep, and the boundary rider who looks after the fences that look after the sheep, and the station hands who help to muster the sheep for shearing, and the shearers who take the wool off their backs; and even the cook who cooks for those who shear it, and the bullocky who takes it to the train. And there is no conceivable logical reason why they should draw the line there, and not include the porter and the engine-driver, and the carter and the lumper, and the dumper and the clerk in the wool stores. In a strict sense, perhaps, the only producer of the wool is the sheep on whose back it grows. But to give the term any value at all they apply it to the men whose part, if you come to think of it, consists almost entirely in shifting the wool from one place to another. And if there is any one agent in that long progress from the paddock to the loom who shifts it swifter than any other, and from more awkward corners, through longer, hotter, wearier, dustier distances, by more continual use of his quick body and almost quicker brain, it is the sheep-dog.

If a code were drawn up for Australians there would be a subsection excepting snakes, fish, and sheep-dogs from the common rule about lying. If a man couldn't tell lies about his sheep-dog, what could he tell lies about? After all, if he didn't tell lies about his own sheep-dog, he would not be so very different from other people's sheep-dogs, which is absurd. It is impossible to go anywhere in Australia without meeting some new version of the old drover who taught his dogs to steal sheep and bring the mobs a couple of weeks along the road; and taught them so successfully that when he finally went to gaol the dogs continued to bring along mobs, and had to be shot; or the story of the other drover who trained his dogs to go ahead and pick a site for his camp whilst he brought along the cattle, and found when he got to the camping place the dogs squatting around a pile of sticks they had fetched for the fire.

And yet those lies go sometimes a lot nearer to the truth than most townsmen have any idea of. There have been plenty of dogs who would let their master go ahead and choose a camp, and get sticks whilst they followed with the mob half an hour behind—or half a day, for that matter; or would even go on half a day ahead; and who, when the sheep are delivered and their master lies at the side of the road properly inebriated, will

keep watch over his body until he is sober enough to keep watch over himself.

But to see the dogs do their ordinary work in the mountains is quite enough, without any parlour tricks. Sheep have a way—inherited, they say, from the long-forgotten centuries, when there hunted through the old-world valleys wolves, and even beasts, it may be, whose very likeness has vanished out of the forests many thousands of years—of huddling near the hill-tops in wild country; so that when the men go to muster in some of those parts where the paddocks stand mostly on end, or the ridges take the place of fences, there are dozens of sheep in corners and crevices which their horses would need to climb like goats even to get a sight of.

But where the man can't go the dog will. He is off at a sign through the scrub, and you wait on your horse at the mouth of the valley. You see him for a second or two far up on the skyline working through the rocks like an ant—and then over and gone.

Later—it may be ten minutes, or twenty, even half an hour—he comes back with the sheep. You may turn your horse and go slowly on. He'll bring them up to you all right; the chances are he will not have left one behind.

They are teaching the dogs to do that in the

New Zealand mountains nowadays. They have long done it in Monaro. The Australian who did not recognise his companion in the cold fogs of the mountains, and the teeming dust-laden short-tempered summer of the plains, to be a fellow-producer of wool, would be a very graceless Australian indeed.

VII

THE RED COUNTRY

WHEN Europeans, and some Australians too, write about the monotony of the Australian scrub—gum trees, and gum trees, and gum trees still beyond that—they write conscientiously enough about what they have seen, which is a strip of Australia along the coast. But they have no right whatever to speak of Australia as a whole; because the greater part of Australia is the part they have not seen, and the chief mark of the scrub which grows in that part is that it is crammed with a bewildering variety of trees. Generally, on no two miles, often on no two acres, are the trees the same. The difficulty for a stranger is to know what sort of tree he is for the moment passing, because you may count thirty different sorts of tree in a drive through one paddock. Many Australians do not know them by name, much less by sight. But they are the most beautiful trees in Australia.

The most graceful tree in Europe is the silver

86 On the Wool Track

birch. Householders cram it into every garden, and artists into every picture. There's a tree out-back which is almost the exact counterpart of the silver birch. One would have thought it would have been transplanted in every suburban front lawn. But very few suburban Australians have ever heard of—much less have seen—the leopard-wood. And the rabbits are slowly ringbarking it out of Australia.

Now, the point of all this is that there exists inside coastal Australia a second Australia—the larger of the two at that—of which most Australians know very little more than the Londoners do. It is the land of those astonishing grasses which spring up and then vanish for twenty years; and then suddenly flush up again to the delight of the oldest inhabitant, who is the only man that can yarn about them. It is the land of the delicate scrub, which is as puzzling as the grass and mostly as useful; of the mulga, the best of all for stock, and one of the prettiest, with his exquisite black tracework of branches against his "Liberty" grey leaves; of the applebush or rosewood or bluebush, which when half-dry is fairly good for stock; of the emu-bush, which droops like the bunch of an emu's tail, and is very good to eat—as the rabbits have found; of the native willow, which is good to make yokes of; of the gidgea, which is good for

fencing, and which drops beans which are good for sheep, and smells so pestilential after rain that they say at Nyngan they can tell you when it is raining about Bourke, because the nearest gidgea is there; of the leopardwood, which is good feed and bad timber, and crops up again as often as it is cut; of the myall, which is good sheep feed; of the whitewood, which is fairly good; and the belar, which is very little good; and the wild fuchsia, whose flowers, full of honey, the sheep at any rate think to be good; of the hopbush, which is good for yeast; and the beefwood, which is good for timber; and the deadfinish, which may be good for whip handles; and the budda, which is good for nothing except to keep the surface on the ground—to stop the wind from blowing the skin of Australia away, and leaving her cheek-bones all shiny red and bare and useless.

For out here you have reached the core of Australia—the real red Australia of the ages, which, though the rivers have worn their channels through it, and spewed out their black silt in narrow ribbons across it, hems in this flat modern river-soil to the flood lands, so that if you drive only a few miles from the river bank you will always come out in the end upon red land, a slightly higher land rising sharply from the grey plain; a land which stretches away and away and

away across the heart of Australia, with the history of the oldest continent on earth lying in interesting little patches—ironstone pebbles, and river-worn quartz, and stony deserts, and a thousand other relics—across the whole face of it.

That is the real Australia, and it is as delicate as its own grasses. In parts the sand that covers it, and that holds the whole calendar of priceless seeds that have taken a few million years, at an underestimate, to evolve, is not more than one foot thick; so thin and light and delicate a skin that only the delicate Western scrub which grows from it holds it in its place at all. In certain parts, where men came out on to it and cut the scrub down recklessly, with rough-shod, ready-made European methods, the surface of the earth has blown clean away. All the exquisite wonderful plant-life of all the ages took just one bad season to destroy; and great patches of "scalded" clay stand to-day exactly as bare and with as hopeless a task to face as on the day when the last wavelet of a receding ocean lapped over them and left them to evolve some covering to their nakedness.

How much even some enlightened Australians know about this greater half of Australia may be judged from a single instance. Not so very many years ago, at a time when that wonderful native scrub was being used as the great reserve of feed

Enlightened Lands Department 89

in the West, and being used, if anything, too fast, and when the one useful thing which the Government could have done would have been to pass a law making it criminal to destroy it, it was found that the Lands Department had actually inserted a clause into its Western leases, that lessees must improve the country by clearing it of scrub. In short, the thing that strikes a townsman coming out upon it is that the real Australia is, even to most Australians, to all intents and purposes, an unknown and unstudied country.

The people out in this country came to it of their own choice to make their living in their own way ; and though they are doing a great work for their country by experimenting with immeasurably the most difficult part of it, they cannot very well expect favours over and above other people who are also earning their own living. But they can demand that the ministers in the Government who are their ministers just as much as the ministers for Sydney, should be able to look at their questions from their point of view ; and they have had some horrible shocks.

Just before the drought broke, the people of Bourke received a visit from their Premier. A deputation waited on him there to ask for a few more concessions in railway freights or something. It was hardly necessary to put their case to him,

because the whole of the world knew by the cables in the papers what the case along the Darling was just then. The grass had long since disappeared; the face of the country was shifting red and grey sand, blowing about wherever the wind carried it. The fences were covered; dead sheep and fallen trunks had become sand-hills. The trees were killed, the birds had been dropping dead. Except where there were trees, the West was literally not different from the Sahara Desert. Some men's nerves had broken down under it, and they had to flee from it in fear for their sanity. The rest of the world had been watching them fight it as people watch soldiers at the front. All Australia, and even Europe, had given signs of its sympathy. What little comfort they had they drew from this. So there was really no need to put the case to their Premier.

However, just for form's sake, they put to him for about three-quarters of an hour some of the necessities which had been filling the newspapers for months and which presumably had been worrying the Government into white hairs. He seemed to be listening. When they had pretty well finished he suddenly looked up.

"What do you do with the country in these parts?" he asked, waving his hand towards the window. "What—er—what use d'yer make of it?"

“D’jever think of Dairyin’?” 91

They were a little surprised. They had just been telling him for three-quarters of an hour.

But they said:

“Oh, well, we put sheep on it—that is, when there is any grass on it. . . .”

“D’jever think of dairyin’?” asked the Premier.

Now if he had gone round amongst the men in that room and had hit each of them hard in the chest, he would have produced the same sort of effect which he managed to produce with that question. They went away almost sick with disillusionment.

That Premier knew something of dairying. Perhaps, after all, he saw as far as most of us do beyond our noses.

For that reason, before coming to the station hands—the homestead men who are the core of the wool industry—one may be excused for explaining a little further that most interesting but little understood country in which the Far Western homesteads lie.

VIII

HOW IT HAPPENED

I HAVE had the privilege of speaking to the first baby that ever came to Cobar. When they let the first Cobar baby out to play around the house they tied a piece of red flannel in his hair so that they could see him in the long grass. The coach horses were hobbled and let loose to graze in the Cobar streets.

It is some thirty years since people came to the country about Cobar. They found it covered with a real carpet of Australian grasses and tufted with saltbush and mulga and the rest. It is something like a desert now.

One does not look for tragedy between the covers of the average bluebook. But here is one just snipped with a pair of scissors from between the covers of as blue a bluebook as ever left the hands of the Government printer. The way in which it happened—as nearly as possible the scientifically accurate explanation of the way in which it happened—is this:

Man, the raw white man, his sheep and his rabbit, were let loose upon a land on which a million years of freedom had stored a great forest of slender Australian shrubs and a great carpet of delicate Australian grass. This continent has never had the chance that Asia and Europe had. Over all their great size trees and grasses and animals and men, too, had a chance of meeting many more climates and diseases than ever existed in Australia. Only those which were strong enough to survive those diseases did survive. That is why the European grasses and trees and animals and men are so hardy.

The Australian species would be hardy too if they had had the chance. But Australia has been shut off from the rest of the world since ever the grasses and trees and animals began their fight for a living. And the worries of their life were so few that the delicate ones survived. If anything ever needed tender, scientific handling, it was this tender covering of grass and trees.

So when man, raw, inexperienced, ignorant, struggled out on to those rich plains and proceeded to man-handle the scrub and the grass, in less than twenty years he managed to destroy the wealth which had been gradually stored there from the beginning of the world. It was a wealth which had painfully fought and sur-

94 On the Wool Track

vived the diseases of Australia itself. Drought did not kill it.

"In the years 1880 and 1881, before this district was stocked, and when it was being improved," said the Stock Inspector of the Cobar sheep district, "the country was covered with a heavy growth of natural grasses—kangaroo grass, star grass, blue grass, mulga, and other grasses. The western half of the district abounded with salt and cotton bush, together with the grasses mentioned. The ground was soft, spongy, and very absorbent. One inch of rain, then, in spring or autumn, produced a luxurious growth of fresh green grass."

That fresh green grass, with the salt and cotton bush, was the one thing that Australians may pray their hearts out to obtain—a plant-life which had survived all the Australian droughts since the world began. That disease it had fought and overcome. Millions of droughts had come down upon it; but after "one inch of rain, then, in spring or autumn" it sprang up "luxurious, fresh and green." Twenty inches of rain might fall now, but it springs no more. The same cold-blooded report of this tragedy went on: "Although twenty-five inches of rain fell over the district in 1891, no grass grew. . . . The ground was saturated with moisture, which produces a green moss only, which perished off with the first dry spell."

Rabbits, Drought, and Stock 95

The first rabbit was reported from Tarella station, near White Cliffs, across the Darling, in 1884. Three record seasons followed, and in the Cobar district 6,000,000 acres were carrying near on 1,500,000 sheep. In some runs they carried almost a sheep to three acres. And it seemed that the runs could well stand it. But by 1895 the rabbits and the sheep had got to their work, and the drought was over the land. Those terrible seven lean years saw the West nothing else than a desert. The sheep were held on the runs in the hope of rain, till they were too weak to travel. There was not a blade of grass on the earth; but the stock walked over the face of it until it was worked into a hard crust. A loose sand swept over parts of it, and covered up even the fences; and actually turned patches of grass land into sandy wilderness. When the rain came it beat off the hard ridges as it sweeps from a galvanised roof. Such scrub as the sheep had left, the rabbits ringbarked. Every station was reduced to a tithe of its stock. Several of the stations have never since carried a sheep.

When the Western Lands Commission met to inquire into this, at the end of the century, the story it heard, and printed in that bluebook, was as bad and black and hopeless as it could be. The country had been made a desert. The doubt was

96 On the Wool Track

whether on that desert grass would ever grow again.

Nine years have gone. Things are still changing, and no one can say quite where they will end. But one thing is certain now—has been certain this last three years or more—the grass is not dead. In the April of 1906 seven inches of rain fell, and up came the grass. The same inspector that gave that black story saw it himself, fresh and green and waving, as high as the tops of the fences. The coach road ran deep through it like a lane. They had been imagining that wherever sand had come over the land there would be permanent desert. As a matter of fact that sand held all the grass seeds. After the rain the sand was covered with grass thicker than green velvet. It was the part where no sand lay that was barren. Not a blade of grass sprang there. But elsewhere the grass grew again thickly enough over the country. A fire burned 180,000 acres of it. We, two years later, drove over the charred knobs of grass through which at least one coach had to gallop for its safety.

There is a small grey green shrub which grows, thousands of square miles in a patch, over most of Central Australia. It smells of bad fish if you crush it, and it is salt to taste. But it does not trouble about rainfall. A shower or two at the

right time, and whole plains come up covered with it. Sheep fatten on it and so do horses, though they cannot do much heavy work on it if they have no grass as well. It makes a magnificent reserve of feed in this Central Australia.

That shrub is called saltbush. There is Old-man saltbush, which grows high almost like small scrub, and the little grey annual saltbush, which covers the plains like wool; and many other sorts, some useful and some useless. The saltbush used to grow around Cobar once. It went in the drought. It has never come back there again. They have given up hope of it.

Another change which looks likely to be permanent has come—not over the Cobar district only, but over the whole West. Where they carried a sheep to five acres or even three acres before, they carry nearer one to fifteen acres now.

This time the figures gathered between Wilcannia and Broken Hill shall speak for themselves. The story of the huge runs told in the table below would be spoiled by comment.

There is a good deal of reason to fear that in one way permanent damage was done before the West was understood. Over a good part of the red country the soil is only red sand a foot or two thick. When the trees were cut down and the grass trodden to powder by the sheep, patches of this

Name of Station.	Total Acres.	Stock carried in 1907.		Sheep carried before the Drought (roughly).
		Cattle.	Sheep.	
Kallara . . .	998,514	1196	81,581	120,000
Momba . . .	1,923,000	353	74,016	420,000
	(now 1,594,402)			
Tongo . . .	181,207	95	15,192	50,000
Culpaulin . . .	160,293	202	15,870	50,000
Weinteriga . . .	523,220	624	49,500	150,000
Tarella . . .	697,304	860	27,512	105,000
Menamurtee . . .	408,888	421	35,091	60,000
Nuntherungie . . .	358,295	582	39,684	150,000
Grassmere and Netallie	322,327			
Gnalta . . .	481,536	92	9,150	100,000
Murtee . . .	343,602	317	23,635	70,000
Billilla . . .	379,600	270	16,456	70,000
Teryawinya . . .	917,337	62	46,108	100,000
Marra and Rosedale .	372,926	613	40,101	80,000

country blew away and left straggling piebald stretches of bare red clay in the grass land—about half being thus laid bare and half still covered with grass. Some people told us they were inclined to believe that these scalded patches had always been so. But those who said they were formerly covered with sand were certainly right. Many of the clay-pans must have had sand over them once, because around the lakes in the middle of the clay-pans are little heaps of hard-baked sand, capped with charred brick; and those are the old beds of the fires at which the natives used to boil their fish and flesh

A Disturbing Consideration 99

on the sand. Rain and wind swept the other sand away, but this is too hard.

There cannot be a doubt that this explanation of the "native ovens" is the right one. They were never heaps piled over the meat, as some say, because there is no sign of fuel or blackening beneath the surface if you kick it open—only hard-baked sand. They only show up where the wind has swept the sand away around them. But there they lie by the hundred.

There has never been a study made of the West or a book written of it. Every fresh man there learns simply from experience. They have all their own theories and most of them their own facts. So it was very difficult to discover whether any of those patches had been known to recover. But, as far as one could hear, they do not. Wherever even a furrow or a fallen trunk breaks the wind, there the sand gathers with the grass seed in it; and these little banks are as green after rain as so many garden beds. The Government now makes it illegal to cut mulga without leaving some shoots which will continue to grow. And the most capable manager we met said that if only he knew of some cheap feasible way of planting mulga he would do it wherever he went. If the shelter were once there the soil might gradually cover the clay-pan. Where the clay

100 On the Wool Track

had been ploughed that seems to have happened. But they cannot plough ten-mile paddocks. However, until the soil is caught by mulga trees, or by some other means, it looks as though the scalded country will grow more and not less. The prospect of its spreading would be a very ugly prospect indeed.

Nearer the sea in Australia they cut down trees—ringbark them, destroy them in any way—to improve the grass. In the mulga country the long dead tufts of spear grass that have sprung up in a good season stand there for years after. You cannot help fancying that the red face of this very aged earth has gone unshorn, and that this is his ugly white stubble of a beard. For the scrub and the grass are both colourless. The mulga which covers the country is a pale blue-grey. The grass is white; the soil bright red. You can hardly believe yourself looking on a real scene. It is a badly under-coloured photograph. Take a grey platinotype; colour the bare patches of earth brick-red, and leave the rest uncoloured, cold and crude and grey. That is the scenery along the Cobar-Wilcannia road.

The greater part of this Western country is literally rotten with rabbit burrows. They have made it a danger to ride fast. But the surprising

A Danger to Ride 101

thing is that for the present the rabbit is not there. That pest was never responsible for all the damage to this country. It is proved quite beyond doubt by this—that the railway cuttings and horse paddocks, most of which are open to rabbits but not to sheep, have not suffered like the great sheep paddocks. But for all that he did not cause it all, the rabbit did cause an appalling damage. There is a tale that in summer, when the grass was dry and a great thirst was on him, 3,000,000 of him were poisoned in a week around one waterhole on Momba run. They counted the number picked up within a few feet, and calculated the total from that. The pads he makes going down to drink in the Darling River are in places two feet deep. Of late something has happened—nobody knows quite what—to decimate the rabbit. Comparatively few are seen this winter in parts where they swarmed of old.

Somebody has yet to invent a way of using this delicate Australian country at its true worth. The nearest they have so far come to it is to crowd sheep on to the paddocks when there is grass there and hurry them away the moment it begins to give out. But they may have to go a thousand miles for their next pastures. And the trek down the dry eaten-out stock

102 On the Wool Track

route to the nearest railway is often a sort of retreat from Moscow. Stations in the far north-west have made desperate efforts to drive their sheep down to Wilcannia and up to Bourke. One mob of 10,000 actually petered out and died on the way near Louth, on the river, in 1907. The last hundred or two were sold there for a few pounds.

There appears to be but one belief in the West as to the chance of using the country for all it is worth for sheep-raising. That chance, they say, is the chance of getting some sort of a railway. But it is a long way to the day when the land will give as it used to give in the days when—when the first baby in Cobar was let to run about the paddocks with a piece of red flannel in its hair, and when the coach owner turned out his horses to feed down its main street.

IX

THE WOOL TOWNSHIPS

THE real Australia has its own towns and its own people. It has three sorts of towns, each with an industry of its own. There is the township which subsists on the mining industry. The great metropolis of the red country—a city of 40,000 people in the midst of a basin as red and bare as the hills of Arabia around Aden, just because every tree of the mulga forest that once covered them, and every root too, has been grubbed up for firewood—is Broken Hill. You can see the faint smoke of Broken Hill for fifty miles over the sand before you get to it. At night it sparkles, out there in the desert, with the lights of a big industrial city.

But these chapters do not deal with the town which subsists on mining. There are two other townships—the township which subsists on the wool industry and the township which subsists

104 On the Wool Track

on another industry which will be dealt with later on.

English people—to whom Australia is a wide space filled in with things called “ranches”—picture a “ranch” as a comfortable one-story house with creepers over the verandah, where young men come in for meals in riding breeches and their shirt sleeves, and occasionally shoot one another over the table for love of the squatter’s daughter. And many Australians think of a station as a house in the bush or on the plains; as, indeed, many “inside” stations are. The “outside” stations are nothing like that.

Over the face of the real Australia there are scattered at very wide intervals, each in some corner of its enormous run, what are really small villages. Four or five miles before you come to them you can make out, somewhere mixed up in the mirage—probably with a streak of blue sky below them as well as above—not one white roof, but anything up to a dozen. They peep over dark foliage that is strange in these grey plains but familiar to you—tiny oases of orange trees and peach trees in a wee patch of civilised flowers and vegetables, bordered with a thin hedge, tenderly nursed and irrigated. Probably you do not realise at first that everyone in the place is overflowing with pride in that patch. They do

A Factory and a Port 105

not talk about it, but they are almost pathetically pleased if you do.

The road winds suddenly past half a dozen low huts and cottages—with white-washed roofs, as some protection against three or four months which it is best only to imagine—and several big grey iron sheds, with the odd parts of a wagon or two lying outside of them, till it runs into the stables and ends abruptly. The manager is out with the musterers and not back yet. So you are taken over to a big stone building and introduced to the storekeeper, who happens to be selling across the counter a packet of cartridges to two small boys—"sons of one of the tradesmen," he tells you in an aside. Then you realise that it is not a country house you have come to, but a village.

In that village, besides the homestead where the manager and his wife live, and the children and a couple of jackeroos, besides the overseer's cottage and the hut for the station hands, there is a carpenter's shop and wagon factory; a smithy and engine-room; a sawmill close handy—the sawyer and the engineer or blacksmith are often the same; the saddler's workroom; often a school; sometimes a church service.

And the big Darling stations at least are not merely villages. For some part of the year they

106 On the Wool Track

are factories as well. They may not be so in name, but they are actually—both factories and river ports. At Dunlop, about a mile up river from the homestead, stand some half a dozen large buildings. The four largest are unmistakably factory buildings, enormous grey iron sheds, which are kept humming for two months in the year with the industry of from one hundred to one hundred and fifty men. They shear the wool with the plant in one great shed; scour it with the machinery in a second shed; dry it on the green and press and pack and dump it with the machinery in a third; store it in a fourth; and, when there is water in the river, keep at least one steamer making continual trips to Bourke and back as fast as ever she can get away with her cargo. If there were a custom-house on the river bank the trade return from that one little port in a good year could not show much less than from £20,000 to £30,000.

But perhaps the most surprising building in a Western station is the store. It is really a shop. They will usually sell to anyone who can pay. And the stock—here are some of the things stocked in the store at Dunlop:—

Locks, lamps, lamp wicks, bicycle sundries, string, 3 tons of sugar, 3 tons of flour, 10 cwt. of salt, candles, pens, pencils, ink, sealing-wax, boot

brushes, clocks, brooms, buggy lamps, casks of vinegar, whitening, sulphur, washing soda, bolts, mustard, soft soap, sand soap, Monkey soap, toilet soaps, towelling, calico, cartridges, bullets, bridles, reins, girths, surcingles, water-bags, spare harness, carpenters' tools, guns, rifles (for station use), horse medicines and veterinary instruments, horse rugs, strychnine, muriatic acid, sheep dip, gum arabic, nutmegs, carbonate of soda, cloves, caraway, tartaric acid, saltpetre, candy peel, pearl barley, picture hooks, resin, memo. pads, notepaper, Cockle's pills, castor oil, agreement forms, all sorts of jam, salmon, preserved milk, jelly tabloids, salad oil, glue, solder, axle grease, branding ink, lampblack, raddle, axes, scythes, spades, shovels, rakes, buckets, billies, pots, pans, jugs, dishes, dippers, tinplates, pannikins, quart pots, knives, forks, spoons, butcher's knives, steels, colanders, beds, bullock bells, horse bells, 40 team collars, hobbles, chains, twine, rope, sheep-shears, axe and tool handles, mattresses, blankets, fruit salts, lanoline, pocket knives, matches, pipes, tobacco, cigars, lime-juice, balsam, Scrubb's ammonia, marmalade, Worcestershire sauce, Mandalay, bottled olives, stacks of all sorts of preserved fruits, onions, potatoes, oil from U.S.A., telephone gear of all sorts, tents, tarpaulins, paints and painters' requisites, hops, blue, starch, biscuits, porridge,

108 On the Wool Track

vermicelli, cocoanuts, ginger, tea, tar, pepper, spare oars, and much more also.

It is really a big general store, with a stock larger than is carried by many stores in country towns. Naturally, not quite everything on the list is for sale.

X

THE GREAT RUNS

THAT village and factory and universal store are rather bigger than most. But then, they are on a large run. Dunlop is one of four very big runs, owned mostly by Sir Samuel M'Caughey on the Darling. Dunlop is 1,000,000 acres; Toorale, next door to it on the river, is also 1,000,000; Fort Bourke, next to Toorale, is 400,000; and Nocoleche, at the back of Dunlop, on the Paroo River, is 800,000. They make practically one enormous property of three and a quarter million acres. They reach along one bank of the Darling for 95 miles as the crow flies, or, as the river winds, about 280 miles. The Wanaaring road runs through them for 127 miles. They stretch back across two rivers, the Warrego and the Paroo. The Warrego, by the way, runs from Queensland to the Darling, and the Paroo from Queensland on to the plains, and has only once or twice reached the Darling within memory. But they say at

110 On the Wool Track

Dunlop that the Paroo is the better river of the two.

There is one fence on Dunlop that runs 43 miles; or, if Nocoleche at the back be counted, something like 90 miles.

Now it is very easy to cavil at the use of the land in blocks of that size. But it is very doubtful if as much could be done with the land by using it in any other way. The real Australia is a delicate country, with a peculiar climate, and they are apt between them to hit the small settler the most treacherous stunning blows fair between the eyes. Here is what Dunlop had to stand:

In 1889 and the two years after it the rainfall was twenty-two, twenty, and twenty-two inches respectively. The river came down over its banks thirty to fifty miles wide in parts. There were four floods in four years. They stopped dead in 1893. There has never been a flood since. Instead there has been a series of years with an average rainfall of perhaps twelve inches, and at least one stretch of seventeen months during which less than an inch of rain—eighty-eight points altogether—fell.

The consequence was that in 1894 after a good year Dunlop shored 276,300 sheep, marked 92,000 lambs, sold 13,202 sheep. In 1895 it shored 235,000,

“They have Them” I I I

lost 90,000—dead, through drought—and lambled under 2000.

That is a specimen—one actual blow that fell on Dunlop in one year. From 1900 right on there have never been much more than 100,000 sheep on the station, and they have had to rent country or cut scrub nearly every year. But Dunlop weathered the blow. Precious few did.

As a consequence, a great part of the country is not being improved—is going back, if anything.

“The days of fencing and tank-sinking are over,” said a Bourke man, “though you can see for yourself they’re wanted badly enough still.”

“They won’t make tanks and fences for mortgagees to get them,” one suggested innocently.

“The mortgagees have them,” said the Bourke man grimly.

We did find one man who seemed to be making a success of a little homestead lease in the Far West. To those who are accustomed to neat little hundred-acre farms with nothing big about them except the rent, it may be explained that by little leases in the West they mean anything between ten thousand and a hundred thousand acres. The smallest leases—the closer settlement units which go by the name of homestead leases—are 10,240 acres. The minimum is 2560, but they practically always get the maximum, and their wives and

112 On the Wool Track

daughters have others next door. The rent used to be at least 1d. per acre, but in the drought that showed itself absurd; so they reduced the minimum rent in 1902 (the worst year which ever afflicted Australia) to 2s. 6d. per square mile. The whole West will fall in to the Government again in 1943.

The little lease in question was 20,000 acres, half of it on the Darling. The steamer which took us down the Darling had tied up for half an hour to leave some stores on the top of the mud-bank near East Toorale. Some of us passengers, making across country to a certain white roof, hit, by mistake for a public-house of which we had heard speak, the home of a selector. We had our doubts before we reached it, because we had passed on the way the smallest and one of the richest paddocks of green wheat ever seen out of England. And wheat paddocks are not, as a rule, part of the industry of western district hotels. Near the house was a large drafting yard, apparently built long ago. And in a shed leading off it, at the door of one or two solitary catching pens, with the shears in his hands and a heap of belly wool on the floor at his side, was a man. There was a half-filled bale of fleeces in the shed, and an old wool press just outside of it.

He was his own shearer, picker up, and tar boy. He was rouseabout, presser, station hand, brander,

Ploughed with a Poison-Cart 113

roller, piece-picker, and classer all in one. And he seemed to be satisfied.

"There's some reckon you can't make it pay," he said—without being asked, so you can tell what is the current topic out there—"but I know you can. The only thing is never borrow; go without rather. The man that borrows is broke."

But, then, everyone has not the enterprise to see if wheat will grow even on a few square yards that happen to catch whatever water trickles down from a catchment about ten acres in extent.

"I reckon it's about the only paddock ever ploughed with a poison-cart,"¹ he said. He had two leases, 10,000 acres each, one on the river, the other thirty miles back. From some swamp grass on the latter he had cut and made 30 tons of bush hay. He used 10 last year, and had 20 left. He kept about thirty cattle, some horses, and 1200 sheep—500 on one lease, 700 on the other. What sort of comfort he had come by we could not see. There were youngsters at the homestead

¹ A poison-cart is a cart which lays poison for rabbits. It has a knife underneath it which scratches a furrow in the surface of the ground, into which the poison falls and is covered up. Rabbits will grub for poison, but sheep do not. Though the greater part of the sheep country has poison laid all over it, few sheep are poisoned. But it is said some native birds have been almost exterminated. It is quite common for a squatter to spend £500 or more a year destroying rabbits.

114 On the Wool Track

He was out and away the most successful selector we came upon. His name was a Scotch one.

Now it seems a fair judgment to make that a man like this can work a small holding in the Far West so successfully that he probably ends up by holding a big one, which is about the only incentive for going there at all. But the ordinary old-fashioned farmer—even the sort that grows wheat year after year at Narromine, and tells you to-day there's no call for rotation, "You can't exhaust the chocolate soil," has no ghost of a chance in the West.

The finest selector of all that we met across the Darling, Mr Leckie of the Avenue, a magnificently made, keen, kindly, intelligent giant of a pastoralist, is no longer a selector. He has gradually increased his holding to 109,627 acres. That is not a big station as yet. It is only one of the small blocks into which Momba (once 2,000,000 acres—the biggest single holding in New South Wales) has lately been cut up. But it is a splendidly improved little property. And any man who understands the West and has improved his piece of it and shown what can be done with it in the way in which this selector has done, deserves every encouragement the Government can give him to come to and remain in the West.

At the Avenue 93 acres are irrigated by the

floods of Bunker Creek, and their hayshed is as big and their chaff as good as any in Australia. But there are not two Bunkers in this country, and the irrigation along the Darling banks shows better what the small farmers have to do. For the most part they have not done it; and it is not altogether their fault. The people of New South Wales have talked a good deal of the irrigation which might be carried out by big farmers along the Darling, but they have never locked the Darling to see if it might. We did see that one acre of wheat on the land of one progressive selector. The rest seem to have done very little to improve the land, principally for the obvious reason that they have not the money. They tell of one selector between Louth and Cobar in the '80's, who did not even put up a fence. His hut was mud, and scarcely habitable. But he had dammed a bit of a depression, and his profession was the selling of water to travellers at 1s. a bucket.

The small men have not so far done a great deal towards showing what can be done with the Western district by using it energetically. The figures which we collected in Wilcannia prove it. These figures and this question may seem a dull matter to the casual reader who is not in the West and never likely to go there; but it is a question of pretty consummate importance really. It is a

116 On the Wool Track

question of whether a territory about the size of India can or cannot be of use to a British people—will or will not be filled with the British race. The following are the details of all cultivation by white men in the Wilcannia district:—

Name of Holding.	Total Acres.	Acres Cultivated.	How Irrigated.	Stock.	
				Cattle.	Sheep.
Murtee . .	343,602	167	Steam pump	317	23,635
Marra . .	252,926	10	...	590	24,850
Avenue . .	109,627	93	Gravitation	1336	3,920
Coromandel .	8,960	67	...	24	1,650
Pine Ridge, Surryville .	26,000	40	Engine	80	100
Nelia Garri .	15,822	18	...	31	1,675
Allandale .	24,016	40	Tank	120	...
Nuntherungie .	368,295	22	...	222	39,684
Netallie . .	322,327	29	...	360	...
Riverside . .	3,518	2	Engine	...	...
Black Gate .	19,974	26	...	31	3,050
Mulga Vale .	20,474	6	...	11	1,815
Nine Mile . .	42,640	52	...	113	1,111
Kalyanka . .	74,420	A few	...	58	3,060

So in that district there are some 572 acres out of about 10,000,000 which it has been worth while to plough. Of these apparently two (at Riverside) are planted for fruit, and all the rest for chaff, hay, and lucerne. At Murtee 167 acres of rich red sandy earth were levelled at some expense and water pumped on to them. The hay and lucerne are partly sold and partly used. Whether in future

Might be an Advantage 117

they will be sold as a rule or used on the run is not yet decided. Both crops grow exceedingly well.

Locking the Darling River would give the country plenty of high water, and easily raised. Could they do anything with it? The average citizen guesses that they could grow wheat. For some reason the Anglo-Saxon mind always runs on wheat. In this case the average citizen is clearly wrong. Lock the Darling till it brims, and settle any number along it, yet it will not grow much wheat. Not that it is not physically possible. The soil is splendid. The black soil on the banks will not hold water, and every big flood would sweep it clean of every crop stacked or standing. But the red ground is high, and holds water; and that red sand has had none of the goodness dissolved out of it by constant rain.

It must always be remembered that if in this Central Australia the droughts are a great disadvantage for some purposes, they equally give the country certain conditions which hardly any other piece of the earth's surface where white men can live possesses. That dryness has been proved an advantage in California and Colorado, and it is obvious to anyone who sees how everything—almost every possible plant—grows when irrigated in the red country along the Darling.

118 On the Wool Track

The wheat would grow where the red soil comes near the river—which a fair stretch of it does, here and there. But when the wheat was grown, what would they do with it? A few acres of it would supply the back country, and the rest would have to go down the river and away to England. It would cost 30s. to send a ton of wheat down the river. A ton means about nine bags, and a bag holds about four bushels. That is to say, 36 bushels would cost 30s. to carry—10d. a bushel—before ever they were landed on the rail for Adelaide. With wheat at 4s. 3d., or even 3s. 6d. a bushel, it might be grown as far as Wilcannia, but even then at a portentous risk.

But there are other things more precious which might well be grown along the river and sent down it at a profit. There is a certain Chinaman's garden at Wilcannia, on the red soil—five acres, irrigated by a Crossley oil engine. In it there grows every conceivable fruit except, perhaps, the custard apple. Bananas, strawberries, raspberries, apples, oranges, peaches, plums, quinces, pears, lemons, cherries, grapes, not to speak of cauliflowers, cabbages, tomatoes, celery, and every vegetable in the cookery book. A Chinaman could irrigate a galvanised iron roof and make it pay, no doubt; and the cherries and bananas do not flourish. But surely a country that will foster the Moreton Bay

fig and the pepper tree along with the dry scrub of the West, and such a medley of fruit and vegetables as this, has got its own work in the world. Some day it will do that work.

Indeed, some people confess that with a good pumping plant fruit might be grown even at this day if only it could be got to market. So far the irrigation attempted by the white man has been almost entirely for the feed of his own stock. Even this fodder is a splendid insurance. It will not keep all a big man's stock, though it will keep the cream of them; but it would save a small man in the droughts. Yet hardly any of the small men appear to take the trouble to improve their land in this way.

On the part of the Darling down which we sailed from Bourke to Dunlop, almost all the small holders had actually sold out; and it is doubtful if any similar area of the West has been improved as those four big holdings have with which this chapter opened. About £100,000 has been put into Dunlop, and about £600,000 worth of wool has been produced there. Eighteen bores have been sunk two are running; the rest have diminished their flow, but are now constant.

At Dunlop, on five acres of irrigated lucerne, which was levelled at a cost of £15 an acre, they fed 240 stud sheep for three months—turning them

120 On the Wool Track

first on to one half and then on to the other. They get seven crops yearly off that paddock, and have just doubled the size of it. Every sort of fruit, from strawberries to bananas, grows about the house. There is another paddock irrigated by the water from the woolscour, and to be planted this year with Rhodes grass from Africa. All this is on the black soil—not the red, because Dunlop homestead is within the reach of very high floods. But, to crown all, twelve miles and thirty miles across the Darling respectively, far out on the red soil, irrigated only by the rain around them, are two paddocks of 200 acres each. At the moment of writing they are waist-high with wheat! From that 400 acres they will crop 150 to 200 tons of hay, which in these parts is worth anything up to £1600. It will have cost perhaps £400 to plough, sow, and reap. There is no part across the Darling that can show quite such improvements.

But the best improvement of all is that the land is almost as it was. The fences and gates are beautifully kept. The paddocks are clean. The scrub has not been recklessly cut. The skin of the land has not been blown away by the square mile. The trees are still there to shelter it. And amongst the grass and the herbage that still spring from it after every good rain there is scarcely a useless plant.

The Best Improvement 121

The desolation that could be wrought within five years by rough handling on that run—which has been wrought on some runs—would be irremediable. Luckily in a great service (which the service on the runs of this particular owner really is) they have managed to evolve just one or two men who understand the real Australia.

XI

THE GENIUS OF AUSTRALIA

BETWEEN Gunnedah and Boggabri, overlooking the Namoi River, is a handsome modern homestead built of what seems to be rough-hewn stone. Actually, the blocks are not stone, but clever imitations in concrete. Every block was moulded and squared and dried on the station itself. The walls were built by station labour. The floor joists and roof beams, the wainscots and window frames, every atom of woodwork was fitted, joined, mortised by the station carpenter; some of it cut by the station blacksmith at the station sawmill. The plans were designed by the station owner.

Now, imagine a country gentleman in any State in Europe sitting down to plan a house; and then calling in the groom, butler, and coachman, with a gamekeeper or two, a gardener, and a lodgeman, and suggesting that they should manufacture and cut and fit the stone walls, floors, roof beams



[Facing p. 192.]

IF AN AUSTRALIAN HAS ANYTHING TO EXPLAIN, THIS IS THE WAY HE DOES IT.

Baronial Halls Home-made 123

and ceilings, and then build them together into his baronial mansion. It is probably literally true that if he did so the statement of every man who heard him would be taken as good evidence of his insanity by the judge in the suit of any disappointed relatives who would certainly dispute his will. For those men simply could not begin the work; or if they could they would think they couldn't—which comes to the same thing. The Australian, too, has his shortcomings, a full round share of them, and one would be blind to deny it. One would be equally blind not to see that he possesses one virtue in a degree in which, as far as one has experience of them, no other people possesses it. He can do anything. He is aware of it.

At the little centre of industry on any ordinary sheep run, in the ordinary day's work there will be men making wagons, shafts, iron hinges, gates, steam sawing, engine driving, forging iron, sometimes even moulding it. The man who can do most of these things will not stick at a bit of saddling, will make a whip if necessary, or sole a boot. He will turn soap-boxes into furniture, golden syrup tins into quart pots, kerosene tins into anything.

The genius of the Australian is that he can

124 On the Wool Track

make something out of nothing. Out on his sheep runs, ever since the time of the shepherds, he has had to do without the best things, because they don't exist there. So he has made the next best do, and where even they did not exist of themselves he has manufactured them out of things one would have thought impossible for any use at all. He has done it for so long that it has become much more than an art. It is long since a part of his character, the most valuable part of it. And the man who has that virtue in a degree to which no other Australian approaches, is the station tradesman. Next to him is the station hand.

It is not in Australian natives alone that this great capacity exists. The roots of it seem to go back deep into the British stock. It is only necessary to listen to English as she is spoken about the station buildings on a Western run to realise it. The Australian language in the town is a more or less uniform modification of cockney.¹ In the back country that accent is

¹ Americans do not drop their "h's," and the same is sometimes claimed for Australians. After giving considerable attention to it, one is reluctantly forced to the conclusion that this is not the case, and that the "h" is dropped to about the same extent in Australia as it is in England and by more

only one of a conglomeration of dialects which is taken for granted there. The city man finds it difficult to control his smile until he gets used to it.

Here is a specimen:—

Scene: A new northern shearing shed on which they were just fitting the roof beams.

Dramatis Personæ: A fair-haired nuggety ganger with long arms like a gorilla and iron nails and a hammer sticking pirate fashion around his belt; the station bullocky, Jacob by name, more like a nugget than the ganger. Half a dozen hands of all sorts and sizes, mostly perched like monkeys about the framework of the shed.

The ganger has been explaining to the owner over a plan his private ideas on the position of certain "possts" and the architect who planned them, when his gaze gradually solidifies on a greybeard who is hugging the top of one in a vain struggle to fix two beams there at the same time. Phonetically the conversation is something like this:—

Ganger: "Noh den, dad — what you doin' darr?"

Dad (breathlessly): "Whhat like teemberr are

or less the same class. But the uneducated Australian stops short of Cockney in one respect. He does not put unauthorised "h's" in.

126 On the Wool Track

ye giein' us? These round pine pawles arr no use tu a man."

Bright youngster (manceuvring the other end of the pine pole): "Shike it up, Sandy, you daownt want to be there awl dye."

Ganger: "Dat's no dam good." (In a very audible confidence to the owner) "Dat fellow darr in de white trowsies, he never sunk a post in his life. We'll want dem odder posts to-morro', Mister. Got 'ny sported gam?"

Owner (turning to the nuggety bullocky who is sweating under half a dozen battens he is unloading from the pile of them on his waggon): "Hi, Jacob! you can fetch a load of spotted gum from White Dog, can't you? How's the creek for crossing?"

Jacob: "I specs I'll find bottom somewhere. I'm thinking dis team'll get them tru' it."

Ganger: "He can bring 'em op, ye now; we can't do widaowt 'em, ye now" (smudges a beefy finger across the plan). "We'll be wantin' 'em yarr an' yarr an' yarr, and anodder over yarr," etc. etc. . . .

Now that is just an ordinary chunk cut out of an ordinary conversation. The only extraordinary part about it is that it is not extraordinary at all. The ordinary conversation in the bush is a hotch-potch of the dialects of half the English

counties. The greybeard came probably from Peebles. The iron-grey ganger spoke English curiously, like a Norwegian or a Dane will speak it. It was a puzzle until one found that his particular brand came from the Orkney Islands.

But the real puzzle is Jacob. He is just shouldering the last half-dozen battens, staggers with them to their brothers, flings them down, and stands panting.

"Dat's de won we ben lookin' for," he says, taking out a pipe as nuggety as himself; "must have a fill."

The Boss: "I thought you'd be feelin' it. Finished 'em?"

Jacob: "'iss. Dat's de won I ben lookin' for. Dat's de cobbler.¹ I tought we'd get 'im soon. I'll better be loadin' dem odder possts biforr' I forget, I spec. Gee-ee Baldy. . . . Gee-ee Brown. . . ." And round butt the slow leading bullocks, and round swings the rest of the team, and round creaks the huge waggon squelching the mud aside like soft chocolate, and down the hill trudges the little bullocky flinging his two-handed whip, a trail of blue smoke fluttering over his shoulder, the clink of his spurs gradually dying away.

¹ "The last." The cobbler is the last sheep in a shearing pen.

128 On the Wool Track

"He always wears spurs," says the boss, seeing that you notice them. "I dunno why; I don't suppose he can ride—he's an Englishman."

That remark may be worth a chapter to itself.

XII

THE HOMESTEAD MAN

JACOB was an Englishman. He had left England so long ago that he had forgotten what the sea was like. But still he had kept the name of his birth-land. Also, in the eyes of the other hands on the station, he could not ride. I could not have told the difference—he could stick on any way. But he had not learned to ride as a baby, and they say you are never quite the same after that. Jacob was an Englishman. For some reason they seem just to tolerate Englishmen in the bush. They use the word almost as a mark for incapacity. "He can't ride. He can graft a bit; but he's not much intelligence, oh no. He's an Englishman," they tell you.

Yet one noticed that if there were a particularly hard, thankless, not over-remunerative piece of work to be done, something that wanted sticking to honestly, through a long day, with a good solid shoulder behind it, it was somehow generally an Englishman that was set to it. This particular

130 On the Wool Track

one, Jacob, was pure English, from Somerset. He was not clever. He could write his name if he were not interrupted. If he were disturbed he had to go back and begin again. But we watched him loading those "possts"; and I never saw anyone work like him. The "possts" were enormous twelve-inch baulks, stacked under a lot of loose timber, so that they needed to be pushed out clear before he could get at them to parbuckle them on to the wagon. Jacob burrowed into the pile flat on his chest, for all the world like a rabbit with a dog after it; got his shoulder up to the butt of the post he wanted; and then wriggled, wrenched, tore, shoved, as fiercely as a terrier in a dog-fight, until the post gradually emerged from its brothers, and after it—head to foot in dust, dripping with sweat, his huge brown muscles trembling like a frightened child's—four cubic feet of cast-iron Englishman.

"How'd you like it if one of them fell on you, Jacob?" asked somebody.

"I spec I'd dint it," he said. Perhaps he would have.

A fair proportion of the Australians who are described throughout these chapters were born in Great Britain. They do not go straight to the West, but they often get there after some years

through droving. One man — a thoroughly successful man — told us that he was droving through the North-West not long after he reached Australia, and happened to be sitting on a post in a drafting yard counting sheep which the boss was putting down the race to him. On the post opposite him sat a stranger. During the middle of the count they happened to look up, and their eyes met. The next instant they were off their rails and down in the yard shaking hands for all they were worth, the boss swearing and the sheep racing to Jericho. The last time they had met was as small boys in a lower form at Clifton College.

People do not always look at both sides of the question when they're criticising the Englishman. He has had some calling, perhaps that of a ploughman or a cook, in the old country. He's told there's room for both up-country. So he comes out.

You may see him any day in the Sydney streets these late years. You cannot mistake him. A Sydney man picks him out at once by his tweed cap, soft collar, turned-up trouser hem, the thick soles of his boots, the apple red of his cheeks. They are the natural signs if you come to think of it. The tweed cap was not meant for this sun. It is cold winds, not hot, that turn

132 On the Wool Track

the cheeks that particular sort of red. The thick soles and turned-up trouser hem are really a precaution against rain which is not falling in Sydney. The Sydney clerks, as they hurry along the pavement to the Exchange or the tea-rooms, tell one another that it is raining in London. That is a proverb in Australia.

For about half a day the apple-cheeked boy straggles around town—three or four in a bunch, obviously shipmates, all sturdy boys, but not very tall—staring disconsolately up at the big buildings. He is obviously suspicious of the city because he has been carefully and very wisely warned by the agent general's people in London that these Australian capitals are places to get away from as soon as may be. He is a good simple country chap, and takes the advice earnestly. He grumbles at the strangeness of the land for a few hours. The very next morning that same great empty thirsty land, of which the city gives him no hint, has swallowed him up. He has gone to be a cook or a ploughman. They told him in England that there was room for both up-country.

Now there may be lots of people up-country who do want cooks. One manager told us of a farmer he had just seen who wanted one. He had met him on the road and told him so. The



[Facing p. 132.]

AN IMMIGRANT.

manager asked what sort of a cook he would prefer.

"Oh, well, just a man who can kill a sheep and cut wood," he said, "an' do a bit of milkin', and perhaps fetch water. It might be a good thing if he was a good hand with a horse. . . ."

That is the sort of thing which puts a cook from England, where society has been split up into sections, each one doing its own job, without thinking of trenching on anyone else's, for a time whereof the memory of man runneth not to the contrary, at a distinct disadvantage. And as for the ploughman, he can drive a furrow as straight as a surveyor could draw it, because his ancestors have done nothing else for twenty generations. But because he cannot milk cows and make four-railed fences, which don't exist in England, he is put straight from the ship to burn off dead trees under a sun that is already hotter than anything he has ever felt before. There is generally plenty of that work going at good wages. "They give us a job Australians won't do," one immigrant told us. There is perhaps just a fraction of truth in it. The man who will do a job which some Australians will not does not suffer for it all the same in the end.

The trouble is that words do not mean the

134 On the Wool Track

same thing in England and Australia. When an Englishman comes out as a "labourer" or "farmer" or "dairy-hand" or "ploughman" or "groom" or "cook," he does not think that he is signing on for active service. And yet here is a job which every Australian would take for granted as certain to come, sooner or later, in the day's work to every "farm labourer," "farmer," "dairy-hand," "ploughman," and perhaps even to "cooks" and "grooms" in the bush. Short of putting a man up and running a piece of iron through him, there is probably nothing more like real warfare in the world.

It is a job that may come upon them at any day or hour of the summer or early autumn—they never know when. A lightning flash, or a dropped match, an unextinguished camp-fire, tree boughs rubbed together in the wind, even a broken glass bottle out on the plain with the Australian sun focused through it, may start the flames. The rest follows like a thunder-clap. One has seen rich men in town enjoying themselves in the height of the season, when a wire comes and they have to hurry back and fight a real enemy. One could not help thinking of the ball before Waterloo. Take one ordinary instance.

A boy of twenty-three was managing a small

station. One Friday he was starting from the homestead to drive fourteen miles to the railway town (which was south of him) for the week-end, when he saw sailing slowly over the hills behind the house, about seven miles to the north, a little buff-grey pearl of smoke. It was rising from a neighbour's paddock. As a matter of course he swung the buggy horses round and drove that seven miles to the fire to see if help were needed. They told him no. The fire was well in hand. So he turned the horses round again and drove into town—twenty-one miles.

At seven o'clock that night a telegram came through to him at the hotel in the railway town—"Fire making head." The buggy horses were put in instantly. At 9 p.m. he was back at his own station—another twenty miles.

He found that some of his own men had already walked on towards the fire without waiting to be told. With the remainder he harnessed up the fire-cart—the horse artillery of this sort of warfare,—left it to follow, saddled a fresh horse, and galloped to the fire—another seven miles.

All night long on the flank of the fire that reinforcement of seven men beat at the flames, headed them, turned them, checked them, fought

136 On the Wool Track

desperately, without food or drink, in dust and heat and aching stifling smoke, till their eyes could scarcely bear it, their tongues parched, their throats swelled.

They fought all that night until eleven on Saturday morning. They had control of the fire then. So they left the fire-cart with the men belonging to the spot for further use if needed, and returned to their own station in time for mid-day dinner. They sat over it for a bare half-hour when someone went out on to the verandah. There from the horizon, from the same property, from a part of it also about seven miles away but in a new direction, were rising other clouds of thick black smoke.

The men were willing. They made for their horses, scuttled down the paddock and straight across country; galloped all the way—another seven miles. They were first in the field this time. The horses, two of which had been driven fifty miles the day before and the rest just galloped fourteen miles, could barely walk at the finish. The fire-cart was fourteen miles behind at the other fire; but the spring-cart came up with water-bags, and they began to drive the fire from its flank towards a road which was five miles ahead. And then, as soon as they could spare

them, they sent back two men for fresh horses and the fire-cart.

It was seven more miles home with the horses; seven further to the first fire, with a led horse for the water-cart; seven home again through the dark with the water-cart. And the man who was sent for the cart was not one of the most satisfactory hands on the station at peaceful times. But he had that cart at the homestead by eleven on Saturday night, and was eager to be allowed to take it on straight to the new fire. He was only dissuaded on being shown that it was impossible to steer it through the bush by night. He was sent off at 2 a.m. instead. He found that the men had fought that fire all through the second night. They were able to leave it at mid-day on Sunday.

Now reflect on this. Neither of those fires was on the property on which either that manager or those men worked. And men are not paid for subduing bush fires, on the principle that bush-fires are not things to be encouraged. They fought and galloped for forty-eight hours continuously as a matter of fellowship; thrashing the flames till they were blacker than sweeps; rushing in upon the fire for a few moments and then retiring choked and breathless. Their clothes were burned. The hair was singed from their faces and hands.

138 On the Wool Track

Their eyes and throats were swollen and sore. Their tongues were twice the normal size and at times lolled out of their mouths. Such food as they had was brought them at their work by the people whose paddock was burning. Their drink was a little cold tea. And most of these men would wonder why anyone should bother to tell about it. For though it is fighting as hard as Dargai Heights, there is nothing in it that is out of the day's work in the bush.

It may be ten or fifteen years after he went off into that fiery school before you will see the apple-cheeked youngster again. When next you do see him, he may be a rich man or a poor man, a good man or a bad man; but he will not be an Englishman. He carries in his mind a memory of Sussex dog rose hedges or Warwickshire lanes. But, whether for better or for worse, he comes out of that life an easily recognisable Australian.

Lord Kitchener said the other day in Melbourne: "A great deal of training that would, in the ordinary course, have to be supplied to obtain an efficient soldier is already part of the daily life of many of our lads." He went on to pay his hearers the very high compliment of saying that, as raw material for soldiers, Australians were the equal if not the superior of any people he

knew. Lord Kitchener, a little before, had seen a troop of light horse vanish at a gallop into thick bush and reappear at a gallop the next moment. Lord Kitchener himself relieved, at Eland's River in South Africa, three hundred men who without one gun had held on, for ten days after the authorities had given up their position as hopeless, against ten times their number of Boers planted with many guns on high hills all around them. Such qualities as Australians have are, of course, only drawn from the British race, because the people of Australia is as purely British as the people of Great Britain — perhaps more so than the population of London. But these qualities were never and never will be drawn from the race by the sea beaches and soft breezes, sweet fruits and easy hours of which the advertisements speak. The men who fought at Eland's River came spare and brown and wiry from the cattle stations and sheep runs of Queensland.

Many Englishmen might not take these chances if they really understood what they meant. A Scotchman would, every time. And there is no doubt the Englishman stands to benefit just as much, whether he relishes the change at first or not, in a country where his future depends, as nearly as is humanly possible, upon his brains and courage and energy.

140 On the Wool Track

It is not the general rule that the Englishman is the most capable immigrant for station work. We generally heard that the Scotch were those who got on best. The German is a painstaking, steady farmer. But he has not got the snap in him that the English have. An Englishman, when it comes to a tussle, will do five times the work a German can, and do it in half the time. He will afterwards spend the money five times as quick.

I was asking the manager of a Western run if it were possible for any man not bred in the country to become a good bushman. "The best bushman I ever knew," he said, "was an immigrant—an Englishman. He is the best stockman I have. I can send him anywhere with sheep, and I know that they will be better looked after than if I were there myself. I've offered him ten shillings a week rise to stay on with me, but he won't. He's not dissatisfied, and he doesn't say anything except that he wants to go off to England for a bit." The manager was obviously puzzled.

"He's a queer cove," he said. "He says he takes these trips to England every now and then just for a holiday. That's all he told me."

A little way along the road we met some sheep the manager was a little anxious about. There

was a tall, spare man with them, with a dark, pointed beard, brown cheeks, and a striking twinkle in his blue eyes, which gave him the air of thinking a great deal more than he ever said. He had slept out on the road with the sheep the night before. It had been cold even indoors under two blankets, and by some mistake or other the manager had the man's rug with him in the buggy.

“ I was all right,” he said as he wheeled his horse round to leave our buggy. “ I made a good fire, and slept close to it.” And he cantered back to his sheep, the tails of his long overcoat flopping like two loose ungainly ears on his horse's flanks. He rode like an Australian, without leggings, in ordinary long blue trousers. That was the Englishman.

Next day, when the coach picked us up further on, at the hotel, the Englishman was on it. I had the seat next him. He was off for his holidays now, and he told us so light-heartedly. He was about due for the trip, he said. The last trip he took home was in the drought. He was working on a run the other side of the river at Bourke during the drought, and he got tired of shuffling his horse through the dust in the paddocks day after day. “ It got on your nerves, you know,” he said. “ So I just reckoned I'd go

142 On the Wool Track

home to England and wait till it was over. And that's what I did."

"I'm going to England now," he said. "I suppose in about two months I'll be in London. I'll just slip down to B—— (he mentioned a Hertfordshire village) in the early morning; and my mother'll find me sitting there by the fire when she comes down to breakfast. That's the first they hear of me."

He told us how he had taken thirteen wild Irish Australians into a Euston public-house when the steamer got in early one morning and there was nothing else to do. He knew the girl at the bar there. He bought the whole thirteen drinks, and he stood by to watch their faces and her stare when they asked for the bottle (after the Australian custom) and she would not hand it to them.

Those were the sort of amusements he drew from his travels around the world.

He was the son of a farmer in one of the home counties. He had been an apprentice on a sailing ship, but the captain was too rough for his liking and he had left. His great friend in the village he came from was the son of a butler in an aristocratic house. The butler's daughter had married the gardener—which had been a great shock to the family. The butler's son had gone to America—

On the Village Green 143

had been there for years. And it happened that the two friends on one occasion returned to the old village together.

Every time they returned they used to buy drinks for the old men of the village at the public-house. They would buy them beer all round and leave them there to finish it. But this time they joined together.

"We got a teetotaler, and two barrels of beer, and we put them on the village green and him in charge of it. It was a terrible night," he said. "The whole village was roaring, lying about all over the place. I think it was looked on as rather a scandal. We left soon after."

During his short holidays in England he had been made manager of the farm of a well-known peer, and he had been asked to stay there. He would not. He was apparently as straight as a bee-line, but he wanted to see the world. And this was his way of seeing it. He was an excellent worker, and so he could pick his work. He was going to take a winter in Queensland.

"I must see New Zealand, too," he said. "It's the one part out here I haven't seen. You can't see it under twelve months. I'm going to see Canada and the United States afterwards."

Perhaps he is there to-day. Probably he will be,

144 On the Wool Track

as he said so. Only he was going to see his mother and his father first.

That man, in addition to being a bushman, was a bushman who had never ceased to be an Englishman. He dressed, and rode, and worked like any stockman from the Four Corners. He was a master of Australian ways, but he had never become an Australian. His home and his thoughts were always in England. In that respect he was the only man of the sort that I ever heard of.

Naturally, therefore, he was not in other ways the sort of immigrant one meets every day. As a matter of fact, a fair proportion of the immigrants appear to be good men; and a fair proportion are not—exactly as with Australians. We heard of plenty of both. Sailors make good colonists because they are versatile. They are to be found all over the country. Possibly they have not all arrived through the recognised channels of immigration. They will do any sort of work as a rule. “I had a fellow called Seaman George up here fencing for me,” one Southern manager said. “He was sinking deep holes for the posts. He was very busy. Whenever I drove up he’d start doing handsprings all over the place. He’d such a head of steam on, and jumped about so much, that I thought at last I’d better see what was the matter.

We found he'd been sawing the bottom off all the posts and sticking them in one foot deep instead of four."

One manager told us the two Royal Navy men were the best hands he had. On the other hand, they get some surprises from the army.

A squatter instanced a groom whom he had engaged on the strength of his having served six years as a driver in the English Artillery. "He was civil enough," he said, "and he meant well. But he knew nothing about horses. He couldn't clean a horse, he couldn't ride one, he couldn't even saddle it. We let him out on a racehorse, and he was immediately bolted with. He could never do anything without being told. He was just helpless."

Of course that man was not a fair example of the Royal Artillery, but he was a fact. On the whole, it appears to be taken that the soldier does not make a good immigrant. His training seems to make him too helpless.

The groom who took his place was an Australian. He wouldn't touch his cap, or say "Sir" twice in one day. He'd utter about three syllables in the course of a thirty-mile drive. But he would do quietly and well all that he was told—and more. He would sit up all the night with a sick horse without anyone's suggestion. Some of us went one

146 On the Wool Track

day to the event of the month, a coursing meet in the nearest town. He had been as keen as anyone to put his bit on one of the dogs; but he never turned up. Later we discovered that he had noticed, on his way in, some sheep cut off on an island by a rising river. He gave up the jaunt on the spot, swam his horse across, and got the sheep out instead. They were not in the section of the business that belonged to him. He was groom, not stockman. But then he was bred as station hand.

The truth is that through dealing with natives like that, managers are apt to be hardly fair to the Englishman. That extraordinary versatility, the capacity to do anything, is in him really; indeed it is from him that it comes. But the Englishman has lived in water-tight compartments in a highly civilised country which has only reached its present eminence through everyone doing his own job. He is well fitted for the life he was born to. But for the bush he has one resulting defect. He has at first a tendency to say a thing cannot be done; whereas, of course, it always can. It is a convenience, but at the same time it is a sign of danger in a community, when people begin to walk on the right-hand side of the footpath. They begin to lose the capacity for elbowing themselves through a crowd. That capacity obviously exists

pre-eminently in the British race. But it does not come out till the race gets to places like Australia, where it has to. There it is the genius of the race—the one valuable thing about us Australians, the one point in which, without being immodest, we may perhaps really claim to add our small quota to the precious acquirements of the world.

XIII

THE HOMESTEAD MAN—(*continued*)

ONE can't help wondering, all the same, if things are going quite the right way in Australia. There's plenty to smoke a pipe over at any time one cares to sit on the horse-paddock fence when the red of evening is just left in patches between the tree trunks. The smoke of some contractor's fires, burning off, floats low along the edge of the wood. A boy—a tall, slender cornstalk in knickerbockers with a pea-rifle over his shoulder—is stalking slowly through the trees. Somewhere down in the hollow the whistle of the sawmill hoots. From the homestead comes a faint, rather musical din. It is six o'clock, and the cook is banging the old plough disc which hangs outside the hut for a gong. The hum of the saw runs down and dies. The smith is putting on his coat, the carpenter is filling his pipe, each of the station hands is turning slowly homewards from his work to his tea. That is the time to think.

On the Horse-Paddock Fence 149

That tall, lanky boy there that passed just now through the edge of the bush does not look a precious possession perhaps. But he is. In a way, he is the most precious possession his country owns. An Englishwoman, who had lived in this country for many years, once gave me perhaps the best illustration I ever heard of the Australian boy.

She was staying at a little country homestead about six miles from a small town. A widow lived there with two daughters and a little son. I forget the boy's age, but I think it was either six or eight.

It happened one day there was some shopping to be done—the elder daughter wanted some ribbon of a particular colour, there was some harness to be mended, and some butter or something of the sort to be sold, and one or two small matters to be attended to. The sister could not go in, so she had to entrust the matching of the ribbon to her small brother to do for her. Early in the morning he went out and got the horse, harnessed up the buggy. His mother had given him the final instructions about the ribbon, and he had gone.

They were sitting at dinner when they heard a buggy drive round to the stables. They took it that it was Jim back again from town, and kept his dinner hot for him. But he did not come in.

150 On the Wool Track

At last his mother went to see what was keeping him.

She found him lying on his bed crying. He had finished his commissions. The butter was sold all right, the harness mended; the ribbon was the right sort of blue. But he had had toothache for some days. He had not said anything; but after he finished his commissions in town he had gone in to the dentist and had his tooth out. It was hurting him.

If the Australian bush boy is a man before his years he is very much a boy too. That infant had gone through with his trial without telling anyone. But his feelings were overwrought, and he had to make up for it afterwards.

In older countries people may count it against that boy that neither as a youngster, nor afterwards as a homestead man, is he forward to protest his loyalty to the boss; he has got a different way of showing any feeling that he owns to from that which men who have grown up in the shoes of feudal retainers in the older countries would use. But then he is not a retainer, and loyalty is not a feeling which he generally owns to. It is there all the same. For example: A younger son was managing a station which his father, and probably his grandfather, had owned before him. He had driven a mob of sheep into the railway to truck to

Sydney, and had taken an old stockman with him to help muster and truck them. They rode in and worked through the afternoon till the sheep were all on the rails. But when it came to paying for the trucks, which had to be done before they could be sent away, the boy found he had forgotten his cheque-book.

The station master was a new man and did not know the boy's name, or he would probably have sent the sheep on and let him post the cheque in to him. But he would not do so, and of course he was quite right in this. On the other hand, it was absurd to keep the sheep in the trucks for a day or so until the cheque-book could be fetched. The boy offered to draw up a cheque on ordinary writing paper and stamp it—that would be good enough. The station master would not accept this either.

They were in the station master's room, and all the while the old station hand was looking on over the boy's shoulder. Suddenly he took something from his belt and flung it on to the table between them.

“Go on, you pup,” he said to the station master “take that!”

It was a bag full of gold. Having no better place to put his savings he carried them about with him. There were £80 in that purse. The boy

152 On the Wool Track

wanted to refuse, but the old man would not let him.

"Well, you had better count it here with me before I take any of it," the boy said.

But he would not. "You will give me what you take," he said. He could not get over the station master refusing to take a cheque that would have gone like gold through the back country for forty years past. That was his way in showing his belief in the boss's son.

Station hands at times will pledge more than their purse for a man they have served. A manager told us of a stockman of his who had lately gone into town on station business. The police rang up a little later to say that they had him in the lock-up. Amongst other things he had been fighting. "I suppose I ought to have sacked him," said the manager. "But it turned out that he had fought a man in a bar who had been saying that he would like to hammer me. You can't very well sack a fellow for fighting when he has been fighting for you."

To show publicly his attachment to any man is not a quality of the Australian. He would be rather ashamed to do so than otherwise. One does not say that it is necessarily a good point in him—it may be a fault in some ways. His loyalty consists rather in doing his bit—in playing fair by a

He Can't Afford to Miss 153

man whom he has known as his friend and mate, even if he was also his boss. It can be understood that a man with that spirit makes the sort of lieutenant a man likes to have behind him in a difficulty.

The boy that passed with his gun through the edge of the trees there is shooting rabbits. He does not miss them, because he can't afford to. On this particular station he gets a cartridge for every scalp he brings in. The few he misses he makes up for either with the scalps of trapped rabbits, or out of his money. But they are not many. It is not a shot-gun but a pea-rifle he is shooting with, and he hits four out of five. Naturally he does not go out to shoot rabbits, but to murder them.

In some places, especially near the country towns, the boys make such big profits these last few years, and have such an easy time rabbit-shooting, that they keep away from school altogether; and something will have to be done about it in the near future. But the son of the station tradesman, as a rule, is a capable boy from the time he is born. Sometimes there is a school at the station—the governess lives at the homestead. Sometimes the children's mother or father teaches them, and in some cases does it excellently. They may not be able to tell you the name of the President of the French. But they can tell you what the spiders

154 On the Wool Track

and snakes do, and how the birds build, and just what insects you will find under the bark of the gum trees along the river bank. And if later on you have to ask them to take cattle for you from Rockhampton to Cape York, as the Jardine boys did with the blacks hanging on to their tracks, and got through where explorer after explorer had failed, the chances are they will be able to do it. There is just this one difference between them and town boys—they have had to do something of everybody's work as well as their own, because the others were not there to do it.

Under the circumstances it is a little strange that the Labour leaders of Australia have deliberately set themselves to stamp out the genius of Australians by making it illegal for one man to attempt anything more than one job or leave his own particular rut. They are forcing back upon Australia those minute cast-iron sections, the leaving behind of which made the genius in the Australian character. But they cannot force them on the country, because men on sheep stations are too far from specialists to get their work done for them. Consequently, as long as sheep stations exist there will be found, as there is found to-day, a set of tradesmen who can do anything for themselves, and are beyond comparison the most capable men in Australia.

One Great Drawback 155

Their sons if they are educated at all are, if anything, more capable. But there are very few of them.

It is beyond denying there is one great drawback in the sheep stations as far as the good of the country is concerned. They employ more men than is generally thought, and they turn them out in a magnificent type. But as far as producing future citizens for Australia goes, they might as well be monasteries. They want few wives on the outside runs, and no children. In the West they allow hardly any of the hands to marry, because it means that the station has to allow rations to a man's wife and children without getting more work out of him. For that reason the big sheep station does very little towards populating Australia, except by providing most of the work and wealth on which families live in the towns. Whereas if smaller holdings are possible, although there may not be any more actual workers brought on to the area which used to be a great station, still, each of those workers is practically certain to mean a family and a home, while on the sheep run there used to be a lonely man.

Should there not be some way by which these men, who for all their crude faults are simple, good men in the main, and the most capable in Australia,

156 On the Wool Track

might be peopling Australia with youngsters as strong and capable as themselves? There must be a proportion of them that is fine material for share-farmers. Or if farming be impossible—as in the Far West,—might it not be wise for owners to recognise the political tendencies of the time, and, even if it means a little sacrifice, to let most of their hands marry? Managers have often found married men easier to deal with than unmarried.

As you pack away your pipe you wonder if we in Australia realise the wonderful material we have in the Australian handy-man. Yet we with our socialism are actually making an incompetent out of this wonderful material. . . .

Night is closing in. There comes a thundering as of a cavalry regiment galloping past the paddock fence. The station horses are fresh from their green feed on the flats. The noise dies, and leaves the station to the stars and the night wind and the frogs.

XIV

MOBILISATION—AND THE COOK

It looked like an overloaded towel-horse. It stood in the grass-choked gutter, and leaned against the decrepit grey verandah post of the hotel. Everyone who stirred from time to time down that straggling, wide, very sleepy street stopped just for a moment to look at it. There was a sort of horse-collar of weather-beaten canvas looped over the forepart of it, and another looped over the back part, and a bulging triangle of canvas packed in between. Hooked on ingeniously to various corners were a billy, pannikin, water bag, and one or two unconsidered trifles. From somewhere in front and somewhere behind protruded a segment of rubber tyre. There was scarcely anything else to guess by. But those who went down that street turned their heads and smiled. They knew it well enough. They were looking for a sign of the seasons, much as others watch for the returning swallows. And

158 On the Wool Track

here it was—the advance guard in the invasion of New South Wales.

At this time of the year there begins a great movement way back in the heart of Australia. Far away the back country is all mobilising. Much later we, too, in the big cities on the sea begin to feel the effects of it. They really travel across the sea, and find every corner of the world in the end, only they don't know it.

That wave starts in the Four Corners and along the innermost borders of Queensland. Some part of Australia is always alive with it, for by the time it dies on the outermost edges it is beginning again in the centre. It works towards the south and towards the sea like the stir of wind over the surface of a great forest. At this time of writing four hundred miles back they are just beginning to feel it; six hundred miles back the mobilisation is in full swing; eight hundred miles back the wave has passed them—they are settling again.

Have you ever seen the galahs eating across the face of a paddock, lined out like a fan, grubbing as busy as bees, the birds on the flank that is eaten out always flopping across and tacking themselves on to the flank which is entering new country? That is the way,

each year from July to November, the shearers come across New South Wales. And the sign of them in these days is their bicycles.

It is true some still come on the horses, some in sulkies, some on foot. But of late years the bicycle has spread through the country as fast as the rabbit. It is extraordinary in what unlikely places one finds those tyre tracks. They straggle across the very centre of Australia. We crossed them in paddocks as lonely and bare as the Sahara. They are ridden or driven or ploughed or dragged wherever men can go, and not infrequently where men cannot go. They shear through mile after mile of red sandhill; they wander between the great river-side trunks, over a débris of twigs and splinters and burrs which must have crackled under the wheels for twenty-five miles at a stretch. But the bicycle gets through—if the man does.

The shearer sets out on these trips exactly as if he were going from Sydney to Parramatta. He asks the way, lights his pipe, puts his leg over his bicycle, and shoves off. For precisely the same trip the average European would probably requisition a whole colonial outfit, compasses, pack-horses, pugaree, sun spectacles, and field-glass. The native

160 On the Wool Track

Australian takes it like a ride in the park. If he is city-bred, like many shearers, the chances are he starts in a black coat and bowler hat, exactly as if he were going to tea at his aunt's. When Professor Gregory's party went with its camels and cases of provisions, green umbrellas, and water-bags, and the proper explorer's outfit, to search for something they call the "Dead Heart of Australia," the rest of the party, being told that it was madness to attempt the journey at the time, provided themselves with pith helmets and tropical clothes. But they had an Australian cook. The helmet in which he chose to explore the centre of Australia was a "hard-hitter." He did not particularly affect it. Only it never struck him to change it.

It is said that on the innermost goldfields of Western Australia there are rumours of men having turned up quietly and begun work who never reached there from the West, but who had made their way across from the eastern States, and had finished, as a matter of course, without making of it anything out of the ordinary, a journey which, if an explorer had made it, would have become a bit of Australian history. That is probably only a rumour. But what is certainly a fact is that many of these wanderers—not to speak of the real bushmen

The Genius of Makeshift 161

such as bring stock from the Territory or the Gulf—in the ordinary course of their livelihood, have accomplished (in other cases undoubtedly have lost their lives in attempting) journeys more deserving to be recorded than some of which the memorials stand in great places in the great cities of this country.

And so from out of those solitudes, during a certain week a little before the spring, there begin to appear—leaning against the huts around the big bare shearing sheds that stand out somewhere toward the heart of Australia—bicycles. There is not a bicycle shop within two hundred and fifty miles. But bicycles turn up all the same. Some have brand-new tyres, full of air. Others are full of rope.

There is a burr along the Darling which cuts the back of the shearer's hand as it works through the fleece. It even sticks into cricket balls, and makes them painful to pick up. It cuts bicycle tyres into strips. It goes by the name of binde-i. If you look carefully at the bicycles that come in you will notice that some of their tyres appear curiously lumpy. The rider has foreseen trouble to them, and has got on his way a kangaroo hide and slit it into lengths, which he has bound round the rim. Often, when punctures grow too many to mend,

162 On the Wool Track

they stuff rope or strips of basil inside the tyre.

But the most hopeless accident that can happen to a bicycle is for the front fork to snap off. Probably the front wheel buckles in the same smash. The back fork would not be quite so hopeless, because it is easier to jury-rig a fixed wheel. But the front wheel has to work on a pivot, balancing and steering the rider all the time. When a front fork breaks the average cyclist would think the only thing left was to sit down and weep.

But there has wobbled up to a Western shed before now a strange thing—a complicated arrangement of tree branches and fencing wire. A front wheel waggles like a drunken man between two solid supporting saplings, which are bound to the débris of a fork with winding after winding of fencing wire. Across the drunken wheel itself are two battens of wood, nailed like a cross. There was a smash somewhere out there on the sandhills, in which a rider found himself on the ground, lucky not to have lost his life, with broken bits of a bicycle around him. But he picked himself up and set to work. And in the end he steered it—stayed out, tied up, bandaged, propped, secured, jury-rigged like a ship, grinding like

The Four Corner Slang 163

a chaffcutter, but still a bicycle—safely into port.

What a hold the bicycle has taken on them may be guessed from their language; for in the real bush language, out-back, they borrow their phrases from the things they see around them, and the language is therefore not vulgar, but immensely expressive. It is true that in one part of the back country they speak another bush language, which is a silly affectation. Luckily it does not extend very far from its present home up in the Four Corners. It consists in substituting for some common words other particular words which rhyme with them.

“Look out you don’t lose your old barrel of fat” means “Mind you don’t lose your hat.” Shirt is probably “old lump of dirt,” and pony “Pat Maloney.” How that stupid, feeble rubbish passes as clever amongst people really full of dry humour, it is hard to understand. They are easily chaffed out of it.

But the real bush language is full of point. When they tell you Burns had not fought Johnson for two minutes before he punctured, it is like painting a picture. There is no more common expression than that to-day in the bush. And yet only the other day it was a country purely and simply of horses—where

164 On the Wool Track

men talked, loved, almost lived horses, as they still do nearer to the sea. But in the West there is no room for regrets. If a thing has advantages it has got to be used—as the camel had. And for the shearers' intermittent trips there is nothing like bicycles. They were even used by boundary riders in some paddocks during the drought. And they have forced themselves into the language.

So the bicycles gather outside the hut. Some are like prehistoric peeps; others are sleek with new enamel; but on every one, doubled and tied fast over the handles and front fork, and often over the carrier and back fork as well, as tight and snug and curly as a white garden grub, is the conventional swag. The swag is probably the lineal descendant of the cavalryman's kit bent over his saddle bow, or the infantryman's overcoat slung round him like a horse collar. At any rate, it looks like it. It is always rolled and strapped in three places with particular care. It has usually a canvas tent-fly for the outside roll, or a length of American leather; sometimes a warm rug of 'possum skins, home-stitched and tanned, leather side outwards.

The shearers are concentrating. The sheep are being moved in. For one hundred miles on every

side and more everyone knows that on Friday shearing begins at a famous shed. The news may not even have been noticed by the great city newspapers. But it is a very engrossing big business out there. It is more like a campaign than anything else.

Orders have to be sent out weeks before to the back stations to have the different detachments of sheep marched in to certain places at certain dates. Regiment after regiment has to be shifted in like troops at a big military concentration. The stages by which they come are left more or less to the overseers and their musterers. But the main outlines of the campaign have to be sketched by the manager. He may perhaps alter the dates, order them to slow down or hurry up a day or two, as the shearing progresses. But there is generally little change. When the final order arrives to have the sheep from White Dog paddock in at Emu paddock on Wednesday week, at Emu paddock on Wednesday week the sheep must be, or somebody will hear of it.

For it may be on that very day, or it may be a day or two later, they will send from the station to fetch 5000 or 6000 of those sheep into the woolshed paddock, so that a thousand or two may be put immediately into the shed, and perhaps

166 On the Wool Track

others under it, if it looks like rain. If they are not there shearing may have to stop until they arrive. And that is a fiasco; for the rouseabouts, the pickers-up, and sweepers, and tarboys, and the rest are paid by the day, and have to go on being paid whether there is shearing or not; and the shearers, who are not being paid when not shearing but who are paying for their own food, become naturally restive. The shearers' point of view we heard clearly put in a railway carriage:

"'Ear of the strike at Simpibrook's—Buttaloola?" asked a voice behind a pipe. "Shearers all come out. Reckon they'd a right, too. 'E couldn't keep the sheep up to 'em. I guess it's a fair thing to keep the bosses up to it. Bosses keep the men up to it all right."

"Bad management somewhere," put in a voice behind a second pipe.

"Bad management everywhere," puffed the first pipe. "'E's a child at the game, that Simpibrook. 'E didn't ought to 'ave a station at all. . . ."

That is what the shearers think of incompetent generalship. On a big, well-managed run the week before shearing the boss has probably at least three bodies of sheep on the move in various parts of the run. "There's one lot moving in at the present time from a paddock



THE SHEARERS' COOK.

on a back station ninety miles away," we were told by one manager.

So much for the autocracy—the run. Down by the shed a small republic is forming. The autocracy gets through its business by simply despatching orders. The republic does nothing without a meeting. The most important meeting is one of the first. It is for the election of the cook.

Round the back country at this time of year, depending on their reputation, more or less, for their employment, in the hope of a job at the various sheds, there wander a certain number of reputed cooks. Some of them are pastry-cooks from the towns, some of them are sea cooks, some have learned cooking by helping shearers' cooks, some are not cooks at all. But as shearers provide all the food, and pay the cook four shillings a week per man for simply cooking it, and more than that in the very Far West, the job is worth having, and the cooks sometimes surprisingly good.

It is an anxious life for the cooks. Probably to a big shed the shearers come in batches from two or three sheds that have lately cut out, and with several of them comes a cook, each with a good backing. Their names are put up at the meeting—men tell what they know of the reputation of each.

168 On the Wool Track

A vote is taken, and after it one cook settles down to earn anything up to £5 a week, for a couple of months. The others pack disconsolately, and wander round the country on a precarious hunt for another shed. "Beat by a blanky rouseabout," they will tell you in the railway carriage; "a blanky offsider that was workin' under Jo Donovan at Tiltabunda." An "offsider," by the by, is a gentleman who is learning bullock-driving, and who is allowed to try his apprentice tongue on the offside of the bullock team. The term is transferred to the assistant whom the cook must engage at a big shed, and who, from being allowed to experiment on the shearers, often becomes a cook himself. The cook is expected to allow the offsider 1s. 4d. per head—a third out of the whole sum he himself receives.

"Beat by a blanky offsider, that 'ad some mates there," says the disappointed one confidently. "Well, there ain't no chance for the old 'uns. What I say is a young man will beat an old 'un three times out of four. You don't know what shed my mate Jo 'Uggins 'as got, do yer?"

None of the shearers in the compartment knows of Jo 'Uggins.

"'E's my mate. 'E's an old 'un, but I reckon he's the best cook in all Australia, Jo 'Uggins is.

“Beat by an Offsider” 169

Wonder where 'e is. I'm goin' to Kukuburra myself.”

“So are we,” says a shearer. “But I 'ear they've got a cook there.”

“Why, they don't begin till Monday,” says the old 'un. “They 'aven't elected their cook yet.”

“No, but it's shearin' by contract, and the contractors have appointed one.”

It came as a visible blow to the old 'un.

“That's all you know!” he exclaimed. “Where do the shearers come in? They'll have something to say to it, an' don't you make no blanky errors.”

But one noticed he did not leave the carriage at Kukuburra. And when the train was drawing in to its terminus at Cobar he was still muttering to himself his opinion of those contractors.

“I reckon I'd better stay 'ere a fortnight an' see what turns up,” he said as he lifted down his swag from the rack.

That is the rather precarious sort of trade on which the shearers' cook depends. When he is once elected he can be ousted by another meeting, it is true. But it is not easy to oust him, because generally his competitors have gone their way to other sheds.

“We elected a bloke”—so it was explained to

170 On the Wool Track

us—"in our last shed, Rockheath, in Queensland. 'E come from the Isle of Skye off the coast of Scotland, 'e said. I dunno why they elected 'im, except it was there was only three candidates an' they knew the other two. Anyway, 'e was chosen.

"They 'ad him for three weeks, an' then they couldn't stand 'im. A terrible dirty fellow they thought 'im. I'm not sayin' 'e couldn't cook; but they reckoned he didn't change 'is singlet for three weeks.

"So they 'eld a meeting an' decided to give 'im a bit of a chance—give him a hint like, just to shake 'im up. Well, he changed 'is singlet all right, an' we reckoned 'e smoogged for a bit after that. But it wasn't any good. 'E wore the second singlet for a week. So they 'eld another meeting and shifted 'im. 'E didn't like goin', but they told 'im 'e'd better roll up his swag, quick and lively. An' off he went.

"There was another bloke there that 'ad been laying on terrible 'ard 'ow 'e could cook. There wasn't anyone else, so they elected 'im. 'E was clean enough all right. But 'e couldn't cook. 'E couldn't even bake a blanky brownie.¹ It wasn't a week before they was wishin' they 'ad the old

¹ "Brownie" is a sort of loaf which most country Australians can bake for themselves. It has raisins in it.

one back. But it was too late to do anything then —except growl."

The chief thing a shearers' cook has to be good at is baking bread. The next thing he has to be good at is fighting. Every shearer admits that it is an advantage to a cook if he can use his hands. "You know, there's always some in the mess that's ready to grumble however well he cooks. And it just makes the difference if they know he's game to call them out and tan them." They tell of one very brawny cook who determined to put things on a proper footing from the start. At the first dinner he marched into the hut with his sleeves rolled up and the knots on his arms well displayed, and planted the dinner decisively on the table.

"There's your tucker, gentlemen," he said. "You can have a piece of that or you can have a piece of the cook."

He folded his arms and waited. It was the tucker they chose.

The day before shearing starts the roll is called. Shearers have probably written for months before to book stands. If their name is recognised as that of any man who has given trouble in former years, they are probably refused. Otherwise a stand is booked for them. Generally they deposit £1, which, if they do not turn up, is forfeited, and

172 On the Wool Track

sometimes sent in their name to the nearest hospital.

The shearers, being a republic, elect a representative—"the shearers' rep."—who is their go-between in every dealing with the station officials whilst shearing lasts—a sort of tribune of the people. On this same day the local storekeeper often turns up with his best raisins and tea and sugar, and tenders for the contract to supply the hut with groceries. The station store produces one list of prices and the local storekeeper another. The republic decides which it will deal with.

In most parts of the West butter is something of a luxury. But it may be that on this same day shearer one, smoking on the fence, turns to shearer two, smoking over the gate, and asks: "What's the matter with butter twice a week, Sam?" And Sam answers: "Well, I reckon it's worth it, myself; how about bacon and eggs on Saturdays?"

Possibly someone else joins them; and they stroll over and find the "rep.," who calls a meeting and puts the question to it. They sit in parliament over the motion; and if no amendment is suggested, and there are nineteen in favour of it and eighteen against it, they order butter twice a week and bacon and eggs on Saturdays. If

there are eighteen for and nineteen against, they do not.

Now, these incidents may be trivial. But if they give any clue to the great independent currents that flow underneath the surface and really settle the fate of the greatest industry in Australia, they may have been worth repeating.

XV

UNDERCURRENTS

"YES, we all meet here once a year," said the wool-classer, confidentially waving a comprehensive hand over the bent backs of some twenty or thirty shearers, which were beginning to grow very stiff and creaky and painful towards the end of the first day's shearing; "we all meet here, and we don't know one another. There's no love and affection and harmony between us. It's like getting a team of bullocks to pull together. They're poling on one another all the time, you might say.

"I come into the shed here, and I see a man I'll be working with for six weeks. I say 'Good morning, Tom.' We're here every day for six weeks together, and that's all I can say to him all the time. Just 'Good morning, Tom.' You see, if I was to make myself more friendly he'd begin to try on. They begun to try on this morning, the rouseabouts; put on their coats, and began to walk off with the shearers when

“The Place a Shed is” 175

I wanted them here. I have to be on the look-out for them trying on from the first day of shearing to the last. It seems to go pleasant enough on the surface, but it's fight, fight, fight all the time underneath. That's what a shed is."

We were standing at one end of the long passage way that goes by the name of the board. It always seems to be rather dark in a shearing shed—perhaps only by contrast with the fierce glare of the sunlight on the Australian plain outside, gleaming through every crack and fogging every doorway. Anyway, it was dark just then. The grease in the wool takes no time to polish every plank and post in the shed a mellow oily brown. Such light as shone in, one could see reflected in the dull buff floor as in ice. It glinted softly from the polished side of the pens, from the great polished tree trunks supporting the roof, from the tiny droning steel machines, from the long steel shaft and wheels always turning, turning above them. And it showed up softly the shiny brown muscles, the white singlets, and blue and green and red republican jerseys of the shearers as they peeled off the fleece from each fat, impotent, struggling sheep, much as a housewife peels a potato.

176 On the Wool Track

For some reason the process of peeling, particularly with such a remorseless, irresistible implement as a shearing machine, is always a fascinating process to watch. One stood there dreamily spell-bound as the shiny brown forearm steered patiently over wrinkle after wrinkle, buried sometimes well over the wrist in the wool through which it ploughed—so deep that one swore it must have gone through a jugular this time at any rate. Time after time one caught one's breath whilst the cutter sailed over the eyes and the knee-pads—sometimes leaving a red stain to develop behind it, usually leaving the body the shorn clean white of a peeled orange. From the pens behind the board came the consistent scuffle of sheep. A couple of rouseabouts, yelping like puppies and rattling tin-cans on iron hoops, were drafting sheep from a passage packed like a sardine tin into the pens behind the shearers as they became empty. Then a steam whistle hooted.

For a moment nobody seemed to have noticed it. Then a shearers down the board straightened his back painfully, hung up his machine, put on his coat, and stepped out of the shed. After him another, and another. As each man finished his sheep and rammed it down the shoot at his side, he knocked off. From the doorway came the click of teacups. Within five minutes the last shearers had

finished. The hum of the machines ceased. The engine slowed down, stopped, began to hiss softly with escaping steam. The picker-up raced off to the wool tables with the last fleece. The sweepers busied themselves for a minute or two. And then the shed was deserted.

The wool-classer, the "boss of the board," and one of the "experts" were strolling across to their cottage. A few of the shearers were stringing over to the hut. But most of them—old men, young men, tall men, short men, fine straight upstanding men, delicate men, strong faces, weak faces, clean faces, sodden faces, men in every sort of coat and jersey, in old boots, in new boots, in tan boots, in patent leather boots, in button boots, men with patched pants, men with their pants tucked into their socks, men with their trousers stained and frayed, men with their trousers creased and turned up—were sitting on the steps leading up to the wool-shed (a shed always has a floor raised on posts about five feet from the ground), or on the fence, or on the wood-pile for the engine, drinking tea. A slender young fellow was handing round in a tray an assortment of rather pale white pastry.

It was four o'clock: and from four to four-thirty is the half-hour spell when the shearers make their cook send them up something to eat as well as their

178 On the Wool Track

tea. They had had tea twice before that day in the two shorter spells of twenty minutes each, which came one between breakfast and dinner, and the other between dinner and lunch. But the tea was only sent up then in a billy with a tin pannikin to dip into it. This lunch is a formal affair. It is generally called "lunch" when it is called anything, because the midday meal is, of course, "dinner," and the evening meal has appropriated the name of "tea"; and it is hardly dignified for red republics to indulge in such an aristocratic vice as "afternoon tea."

Shearers are sometimes laughed at for their frequent meals. Perhaps they are not an absolute necessity. But, at any rate, very few of the people who treat themselves to morning tea and afternoon tea deserve them as the shearers do. Shearing may be well-paid work, and the conditions are good enough; but no one attempts to deny that it is real hard work—eight hours of sweating, aching, vibrating work, carried through honestly at top pressure. It is well-paid piecework, which is the ideal sort of work. There's a good deal of grumble about shearing, both from the shearers and their bosses. But if all the work in the country were carried through as strenuously as shearing is, Australia would be a very much richer and more comfortable place for everyone in it.

It's Not in the Contract 179

When work started again after the short spell on the first afternoon, the backs that bent over the sheep were stiffer and creakier than ever. One youngster was obviously in difficulties. The overseer—"the boss of the board," as he is called—was for some time standing quietly watching him struggling with a sheep, nibbling at the fleece with the machine rather than shearing it, making a "second cut," that is, shearing by instalments, leaving the wool too long, and going over it conscientiously a second time, so that the beautiful, long, even staple was minced into short lengths. He was obviously ruining the fleece, committing half a dozen mistakes at once because his back was a lively lumbago, and at least a dozen others because he was being watched. The "boss of the board" did not dress him down and dismiss him, as one half expected he would do. He walked on instead, and pretended to have seen nothing. Presently, from the other end of the board, we saw the youngster step across to the wall and put on his coat.

"May they knock off when they wish?" I asked presently.

"It's not in the contract," said the boss. "They're supposed to shear on till the shed stops. But it's the first day, and he's feeling it pretty bad. It's better for me not to see. That young fellow is

180 On the Wool Track

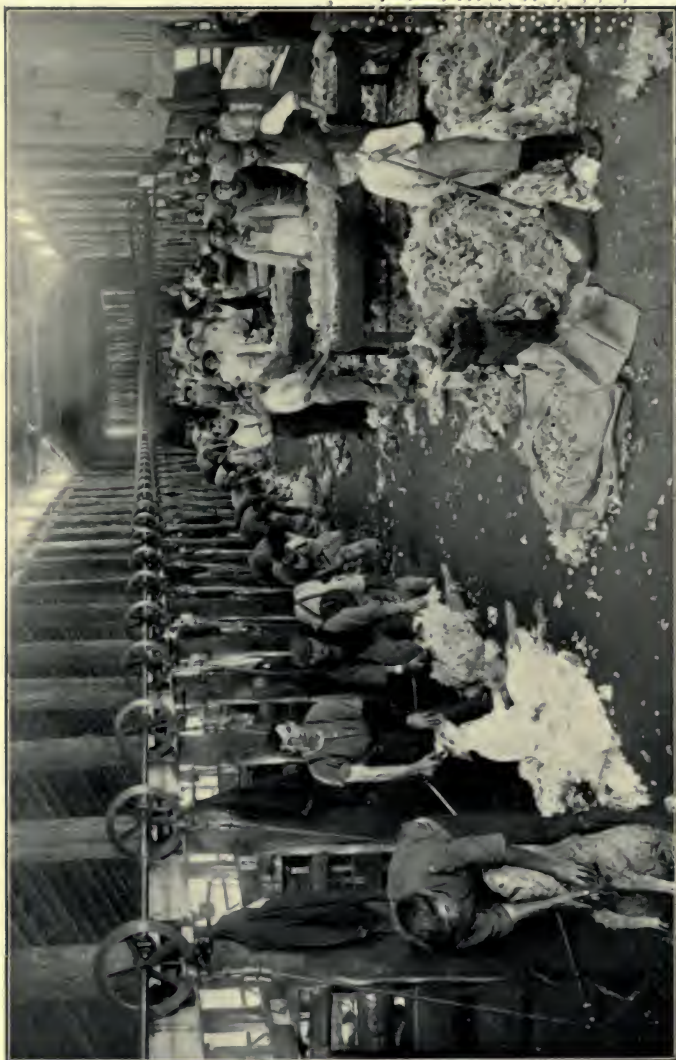
a 'learner.' He's never shorn before, except, perhaps, as a rouseabout. The shearers, when the whistle goes, sometimes let the rouseabouts finish for them the sheep they happen to be on. The boss won't let 'em do so in some sheds. But they must begin some time, I suppose, mustn't they? Well, this fellow's just learning. And he's been having a real bad time."

Presently one noticed the "boss of the board" step up to the man, who was leaning disconsolately against the wall, and say a few words to him. They spoke quietly for a moment. Then the youngster left the shed.

"He's a good chap, a real trier," said the boss, returning.

By this time, when the men bent down over each new sheep, you could almost hear their backs creaking, cre-ee-eaking like doors on rusty hinges. After the sheep was finished something would have to be repaired in the machine—some screw tightening or the comb and cutter readjusting. The men could stand with their backs straight whilst doing it. It was wonderful how regularly it happened, and how long it took. When next they bent their backs it looked as if something was bound to give way if they got much stiffer. And it did.

It happened that the day before there had been



[Facing p. 180.]

THE SHED.



about three points of rain. A good many of the sheep had been already in or under the floor of the shed, and remained dry. But something like an hour and a quarter before they had come to the end of these, and the sheep with which the pens had been filled since then were sheep which had been out whilst it was spitting the day before. The owner took care to be in the shed when the shearers first handled these particular sheep, and he looked a bit anxious. But as they went on shearing them without objection up to the ensuing spell he breathed easier again, and went out and sat on the fence of the drafting yard and lit a cigar.

About a quarter of an hour after work was resumed a shearer half-way down the board stopped and hung up his machine.

The slip of a boy shearing next to him looked up. "Reckon they're wet?" he asked.

The first shearer was putting on his coat. He nodded.

"I've been thinking so too, this half-hour," said the youngster.

It spread down the shed just like fire in stubble.

"What's up?" one man would ask.

"Wet sheep."

"They reckon the sheep are wet, Bill," says the inquirer to his mate down the line.

182 On the Wool Track

Five minutes later the owner, cigar and all, strolled up to the wool-press.

"Hullo, what's up?" he asked, looking down the shed beyond.

The wool-classer was still there with a dozen assorted fleeces rolled up, and laid like huge woolly ostrich eggs on the table in front of him. The piece-pickers were at their tables on either side of him, and the wool-rollers busy at their tables in front of him like school-boys under the eye of a master. A solitary sweeper was shoving a clothes-basket, bulging with ragged wool, down the board in front of him as a porter shoves a trolley. But the shearers were gone. The boss didn't need to be told. He knew.

And there one comes to a conflict that rages eternally. It's as old as the oldest shearing shed; and it may be that the youngest shed that ever stood on posts will have been long since burned for firewood before it is settled. Beyond any doubt a great number of shearers honestly believe that if they shear wet sheep, particularly if the sheep is hot from driving and has the yolk thick in his wool, and the man himself is hot from shearing with all his pores open, they will in some way be poisoned. They do not mean by this poisoning the rheumatism from which anyone that way inclined will naturally be likely to suffer

after this or any other wetting. What they believe in is a special sort of poisoning with effects very much like rheumatism; and they explain it in the language of a patent medicine advertisement, or a Shakespearean doctor, as being caused by some vapours or humours rising from the wool and entering the man's skin when he is hot. That is theory.

I only heard three shearers give a definite opinion about wet sheep. The subject rose in the train.

An elderly refined-looking farmer sat in one corner. He was an intelligent, well-educated man, with a quiet voice which made you listen—a believer in scientific farming and land taxation, among other things. He was going West with his swag, looking for a shed in his slack season. Opposite him, also with his swag, also looking for work in a Western shed, also perhaps a farmer, was a hard little nut of a Cornishman. In a third corner lounged a stout, good-humoured countryman, who, for the time, was a drover, and who, in a husky, good-natured voice, offered one the best tips he had with regard to whisky-headaches and women. He did not seem much afraid of either.

The good-humoured countryman had been holding forth also on wet sheep. He didn't blame

184 On the Wool Track

men for knocking off. He'd heard of cases of illness. He'd only known one, but it was bad enough for him.

"'E was a young fellow," he said slowly, "and 'e shore 'em when they were wet and 'e was hot. 'E took ill after. His fingers and legs and arms w's all cramped up. 'E was in the hospital twelve months, and 'e come out crippled for life.

"The worst of it, it's very 'ard to know when the sheep are wet," continued the gentleman. "It's only those that knows can tell it. They feel 'em on the brisket. I couldn't tell myself if a sheep was wet or not, and the shearers can't hardly tell themselves sometimes."

That was puzzling and interesting and worth pursuing. But the good-natured gentleman reached his journey's end and had to get out. And for the moment the Cornishman in the corner was engaged on something even more interesting than a discussion of wet sheep.

He was tearing off the corner of a daily paper, and the farmer was watching him. Then he borrowed the farmer's tobacco pouch, took a fill, rolled it thoughtfully in his two palms. Shearers are generally rolling plug. But this one was rolling it out, not packing it. Finally he roughly squared off a bit of newspaper the size of his

hand, wrapped it cigarette-wise around the tobacco, licked it to make it stick, put it in his mouth, and began to smoke the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Perhaps one was staring pretty hard, for he looked up.

"Haven't seen one of that sort before?" he asked. "Some of us get into the way of it, out here. Couldn't smoke one of yours now if you offered it to me. Call 'em 'bush 'cadias.' It grows on you. I'm not sayin' it does a fellow much good. I'm trying to knock it off myself."

Now "bush 'cadia" is short for bush Arcadia, and that is a pretty fine tribute to J. M. Barrie when you think it out.

When I had sufficiently recovered I gave another jog to the subject of the wet sheep. The refined-looking farmer jumped at it.

"Look," he said, "I've been shearing forty years now. So you may guess I ought to know something about it. Well, I've shorn sheep dry and sheep wet many and many a time—and I never had anything wrong with me yet.

"I did know one case—a farmer and his son. They were shearing and wanted to get through. There were thirty sheep out in the rain, and they brought them in and penned them. The old man he shore more than the young fellow

186 On the Wool Track

and never had anything go wrong. But the young fellow's arms swelled up, and he had to get into the hospital. He was very bad for twelve months.

"Well—there you have it. I've an idea that when a man shears a wet sheep it is all right so long as the sheep is cool. Even if the sheep's hot it doesn't hurt if a fellow goes about it easily. But a man somehow can't help working for all he's worth when he's shearing—and if a man gets sweating and holding wet sheep he may perhaps get poisoned. I've seen men shear wet sheep scores of times, all the same—especially towards the end of shearing, when they have booked stands in another shed, and want to get away to it. The sheep are never wet then.

"It's when the shed is near a town or a hotel that the sheep get wet. Someone hangs up his machine, and no one likes to stand out. There's a majority, and they knock off. I've seen them knock off three days for a point or two of rain when a shed started. At the end of the same shearing it had rained heavily, but one day was enough to dry them then. It all means that a fellow who doesn't want to work gets his way, and the fellow who's there to knock out a big cheque loses two or three days. You may

reckon this as a safe thing, anyway—that if the wool is dry enough to press, it is dry enough to shear.”

One had been looking at the Cornishman. By his looks he was republican of republicans, a typical horny-handed shearer, with a strong nuggety chin and high sun-browned cheek-bones. He had just been quoting the union rules as reverently as if they were the laws of Moses. One was waiting for him to cut short this heresy with something pretty florid and forcible. At last he did speak. He knocked the ash off his “bush 'cadia,” and in slow, quiet Australian said:

“I think wet sheep are a myth. I don't think anyone suffers through shearing them. I don't think most shearers believe in them. They do when they want a spell. Two doctors followed the question through from Riverina to New Zealand last year, and said that every complaint of illness from wet sheep reported to them could be traced to some previous trouble. There's hundreds of men besides shearers has rheumatism, aren't there? If a man is inclined to rheumatism he naturally gets it after getting wet or even before if there's rain in the air—whether he's a shearer, or whether he's not. So it works out this way: There might be thirty men in a shed

188 On the Wool Track

who could all shear wet sheep without any danger, and one whom the wet would affect. Well, they all had to knock off for him. That's what 'wet sheep' is."

One heard dozens of remarks, which took it for granted that wet sheep are dangerous. And no doubt it was only a chance that the only opinions one heard argued were the other way. The shearers are divided on the point (as are the squatters themselves), and it is a never-ending argument amongst them. But one thing was significant. Neither of the men who did not believe in the danger of wet sheep made any pretence that they would attempt to stand up for their opinion when the question arose in a shed—even if the sheep were not wet.

"What's the use if there's a majority against you?" they asked.

If wool is shorn when it is wet and pressed into bales whilst it is still wet, it is apt to heat and burn by chemical action—"spontaneous combustion," as they call it. Whether it is dangerous or not, it is impossible to shear sheep when they are really wet, and the question does not arise. But whether, if the wool is dry enough to pack, there may still be really some microbe or poison in it which could possibly injure a man holding it firmly between his legs as shearers do, or even

A Question for Scientists 189

any real danger of rheumatism, a scientist could no doubt settle within a single season if he were asked to do so.

He would decide the point, which would be quite a different thing from settling it. "For," as the wool-classer said at the beginning, "that's the sort of a place a shed is."

XVI

HONESTY

NEXT morning the big shed dozed as innocently under its dazzling creeping iron roof as if "wet sheep" had never been heard of. Inside the machines hummed, the belt slap-slapped, the shaft always turned, the shearers sweated. Outside, in the sleepy glare, two men, manager and jackeroo, were bolting from the counting-out pens under the shed the poor, skinny, undignified, decrepit sheep. The shearer, as he finishes each sheep, slides it down a shoot at his side into his particular one of a series of small pens underneath. And now a boy was emptying the pens. As each batch cleared the gate, with bleeding noses, patched eyes, stiff as wire, with the stagger of inebriated slum ladies and the solemnity of centenarian parrots, the poor silly fools jumped high, jumped and jumped again, as if it were part of the formula. And during this performance they were counted and credited to the shearer who owned the pen. Presently, for a

good-bye, each was branded like a sugar-bag with what looked, and apparently felt, like hot tar. If there were ticks or other pests in that country he would have been dipped a little later, bolted down a race, and betrayed by a sort of oubliette into a bath of sheep dip. But here there was no need. They strung eagerly from the gate of the shorn sheep paddock into the limitless West again.

And all the while the shed was humming; and always on the green flat below, watched by one silent horseman, there waited one of the famous flocks of the world.

The people of that shimmering Central Australian run had noticed that when their wool in due course reached London there was always one man who waited for one particular section of it, and snapped it up as soon as it was offered. They inquired at last. He was a manufacturer of a particular cloth for billiard tables.

Now that had little to do with the sheep, for there were plenty like them in Australia. It was really the result of a certain honesty of system which still marks most British commerce—a wise, honest system which voluntarily tells the buyer exactly what he is getting. It is “grading” in some trades, and “classing” in this. It is true

192 On the Wool Track

that to describe a process is to give no conception of shearing—which is a long diplomatic relation between strong men, a mixture of genial autocracy, red republic, cross-currents, undercurrents, deep arguments, deeper silences, tact, pitched battles, real friendship, frank hostility. To describe a shearing shed as a place where they shear is the poorest description in the world. But the system inside the shed is so important to Australian wool—and to all who wear it, really though they have probably not the least idea of it—that at the risk of dullness it must be outlined.

What has happened to the wool which you are wearing on your back, possibly a few months before you are wearing it, is this:—

It was driven on the back of a sheep, in a march of short stages, to the woolshed. After half a day outside it scuffled up a wide gang-way into the back of the huge dark shed, and was there penned in a set of small yards, each the size of a bedroom. If the sheep were wet yesterday a shearer dives in and feels them under the brisket where the wool runs between the bare armpits and heavy rain soaks and lingers longest. If he calls them dry, the shed starts.

Some say that in the scramble up to the shed the

yolk and grease rise in the wool, and it is better for the sheep to cool a while in these first "sweating pens" and let the yolk subside. Next door there is sometimes a line of smaller "forcing pens" for further subdividing the mob. There they wait till the last sheep in some "catching pen" is caught by one of the two shearers who work just outside of it.

You let the other fellow catch the last sheep in the pen you share with him, if you can decently do so. Because shearers always pick the easiest sheep first. If one did not, his mate might. If there is an old ewe in the pen, a "rosella" as they call her, with most of the lower wool worn off, she goes the first. Consequently there is gradually left a bunch of fleeces with wrinkles stiffer than door mats. The stiffest, wrinkliest, is "the cobbler," because he sticks to the last.

One hears yarns of a man's manoeuvres to let his mate get the cobbler. But there's an etiquette in shearing, and it is not the thing. Every shearer I saw worked straight ahead like a good mate; stepped into the pen, took one quick look, dived at a sheep, caught him under the arms, bundled him out, and started. Notice what happens to the wool.

The belly wool must be shorn first, cut off separately, and thrown on the floor.

194 On the Wool Track

The locks along the legs and extremities also fall of themselves separately on to the floor.

The rest comes off as one fleece. The shearer opens up the neck, clears the difficult wrinkles, clears one flank, and gradually works round and finishes on the other. For one second the fleece lies a soft shawl on the floor. A special boy immediately gathers it up carefully by the hips.

If the sheep bleeds from a fair-sized cut the shearer calls "Tar." The tar-boy bolts off for what looks like a pot of coffee-coloured paint—it used to be tar or kerosene and lamp-black or blue-stone, but is now mostly sheep-dip—and dabs it on the place to save it from the flies.

Very occasionally the machine goes through a jugular or a knee-cap, or a leg is broken. With hand shears it was usually taken as a sign of reckless fast shearing. A whole flank can be laid open by one cut. Most squatters prefer fast shearing, but there has often been trouble with record-breakers, because they are apt to leave behind them a trail of badly wounded sheep.

They invented in Australia a pretty machine, the size of a toy, which shorn by itself, and only needed guiding. The first shed to use it was in the Far West. To-day, when nearly every shed in Australia has these machines, some of those great lonely central sheds are putting in another

Australian invention with a tiny electric motor above each machine. And in the cold of morning, as the shearers make towards the big building, it twinkles out here in the wilderness with exactly the same bright light as a London railway station.

Most shearers told me the machines were a bit faster and easier than the “blades.” There is less shoving, and they shear closer. “But they’re just as rough on the sheep. If the expert (the man in the engine-room) hasn’t ground the cutter quite right, she’ll sail through the wrinkles. You needn’t only get one cutter under the skin and the whole blanky machine slips through, and the first you know is the red. But it’s the same as with anything else,” added the philosopher. “One fellow will ‘ave ‘is sheep white, and the man next ‘im will ‘ave ‘em all red—whether they’re working tongs or machines . . . and you can’t alter that.”

A shearer who smothers a sheep or breaks a leg or cuts a jugular has strictly to buy the sheep. But if it is any way eatable the shearers’ mess account usually takes it over. A machine often damages a man—slips from his hand, still cutting, and bares a shinbone like a flash.

His wool off, the sheep is steered to the shoot. Sheep on principle always object to everything.

196 On the Wool Track

There's a struggle, and a short, decisive victory for the shearer.

"Seems kinder rough, don't it, considerin' all we owe 'im?" grins the victor. "But 'is troubles are over for the year."

Most sheep take five minutes to shear. Rams may take thirty, and count double. Shearers are paid by the number they shear, and they might not object to catching sheep even after the whistle blows. But rouseabouts are paid by the week, and if the shearers caused them extra work they would hear of it. The sheep caught at the call of time is a "bell sheep."

Averaging everything, from young wethers, which are hard, to old ewes, which are easy, a good man will shear about 90 or 100 sheep a day. The actual record is 327 sheep shorn by a Queensland shearer in nine hours. And other big records have been made. But that was probably years back with the "blades," when the fleeces were 5 lbs. and 6 lbs., and not 9 lbs. and 10 lbs., as to-day. The station people count out each man's sheep. Their tallies for the day are put up on a board in the shed, and finally their tallies for the week. If the shearer mistrusts the count he often keeps a check on them from the wool-shed window. The man who shears most sheep is the "ringer." As he now gets 24s. for every hundred sheep, and his

weekly expenses are 4s. for the cook and about 10s. for tucker, he is a well-to-do man.

It is often a contractor who actually pays those wages. Instead of a squatter having the trouble to engage shearers and manage them, there are certain characters who will do the whole work for him, pay rouseabouts and all, for 5½d. or 6d. per sheep, which is £2, 7s. 11d. to £2, 10s. a hundred. Some big Western stations which employed them for a time are now shearing for themselves again, in order to save the contractors' profit.

Of late the shearers themselves have taken it into their heads to get those profits for themselves, and have started a co-operative contracting company of their own, which divides the contractor's profit amongst the men. I heard the golden opinions of their work. It is perhaps the most hopeful development in the wool industry.

The wool, you will remember, was in three places: odd locks from the legs scattered on the floor, the belly on the floor in one piece, the fleece picked up. Those three never come together again. That first simple classification follows right to the shop counter.

The locks are always being swept up by special boys—"sweepers." The dirty, clotted, unpresentable scraps gradually fill a line of large clothes-baskets. They are much too precious to waste. The baskets

198 On the Wool Track

are pretty full by the "smoko," and are then shoved along the floor, emptied into a special bin, and known ever after as "locks" or "floor locks."

The bellies are cleaner and more even. The sweepers tear out any stain and throw it apart, and pitch the rest of the bellies into special baskets, which are emptied into another special bin. Belly wool, being close to the ground during the year, is full of burrs. Wool from the forehead, which is matted and uneven, but clean, is sometimes kept separate also.

The fleece—the most precious part of the clip, and the biggest—is not touched by the "sweepers"; is not left on the floor at all. The "pickers up" race off with it, spread it with one clever throw like a cloth over one of the tables at the end of the shed, and race back again. It lies on the table much like a bearskin hearthrug, the points—shoulders, neck, haunches—about hanging over the edge. These flanks have been brushing through the herbage during the year, and are full of burrs and uneven. The men at the table skirt them off, and throw the pieces on the floor. The fleece itself—once the back of the sheep, and so away from the herbage and burrs, and only containing a few grass seeds—they roll into a woolly round muff, and put this, the pick of the wool, on the wool-classers' table.

Now, the tables in the woolshed are not solid like dinner tables, but have tops like pavement gratings. Any little odd locks—second cut, and what not—that are not wanted in the fleece fall through the bars, and mount up like snow-flakes, in fair-sized heaps under the tables during the day.

So that the fleece itself now lies in three more parts: odd locks and second cuts, under the tables; on the floor, the pieces skirted off; on the wool-classers' table, the rolled fleece itself.

The locks from under the tables are swept up, and sometimes clubbed with the dirty old locks that fall on the floor around the shearers. But if there is enough of the "table locks" they are too clean to mix with the "floor locks," and go to a bin of their own.

The rolled fleeces are piled before the wool-classer, the scientist, the expert in wool, in every shed. In a general way he has control of all the wool in it. That is to say, he generally makes a few excursions about the shed, amongst the bins, where the different classes of wool are mounting up, amongst the other tables; sometimes even amongst the shearers. If he sees bits of wrong wool straying into the right place he has a word to say.

But his main work is to settle, here and now, at

his own table, what use will be made of the fleece. And his doing this well or badly has everything to do with the price. In this way: The long wool will be used for combing—only wool with a long staple can be. So those with a staple of about two inches he pitches into two bins behind him, marked “first combing,” “second combing.” His fingers run quickly through the wool, tug at a flock. If it is fine, clean, even in length, he pitches it into “first combing.” If it is as long, but coarser and stronger, with more waste and unevenness, he tumbles it into “second combing.” Shorter wool will be used, not for combing at all, but for clothing. It is pitched into two other bins—“first clothing,” “second clothing.”

A bad fleece never gets amongst these combings and clothings at all. It comes along innocently enough. But he detects it like a Sherlock Holmes. One sheep was overlooked in the paddock, and not shorn last year. Here it is—dry, dark saffron. Another became poor—the wool breaks. Others came along matted or wasty. They are shot out at once, like the sparks in a foundry, into a bin labelled “cast fleece.”

Some squatters call their first and second combings “A1 and A,” or “A and AA”; and their clothings “B and BB.” Some make “superlines” of extra long fine wool. But most stick to these

five broad classes, because a few big even lots sell better than a crowd of little ones. Of these classes it is not the first combing, usually, but the first clothing, that reaches the highest price per lb. Only, as a fleece of first combing is longer, there are more pounds in it to be paid for, and the sheep which carries it actually earns more.

There are refinements in wool-classing. For example: Nearly half the weight of the fleece cut from most sheep is due to that grease in it from which they afterwards make lanoline. The skin of a shearers' hands is soft, almost like a woman's, because the grease actually manicures him. That yolk in some wool is egg-coloured. Now, the whole of this has to come out—to be scoured out with soap and water. And the weight of clean wool left afterwards is often less than half that of the greasy.

Naturally, a man who buys wool wants to know how much of it will be useless. The wool-classer practically tells him. I met one who went so far as to classify his wool to himself as 38's or 45's or 54's, according as that number of lbs. of it would remain from every hundred lbs. scoured. This was quite apart from the ordinary division into 64's, 70's, and so on, which depends on the length of wool in a "top" of a certain weight.

But that is talking riddles at this stage. What

202 On the Wool Track

matters here is that a man who buys greasy wool has to judge as best he can how much will be useful and how much useless. Consequently, if it is yellow and dirty, he is suspicious. It may mostly disappear, or the colour may never come out—anyway, he is not going to take the risk. He will count this unattractive colour as a mark against the wool. And so, if the wool is to be sold greasy, will the wool-classer. He is not going to have the price of his precious first clothing drop a penny a lb. (which seems a little, but is £1 per bale—perhaps £500 in one clip) just because a buyer happens to pitch on a dirty fleece amongst it. So out goes the discoloured fleece into the “second clothing” bin.

But runs in the real Australia, on the Darling and Warrego, where they have water, often scour their own wool. They not only earn the profits of scouring; they save the freight which they would have to pay to carry perhaps 120 tons of grease from the real Australia to the sea—and that’s a terrible long way. Now the buyer has not got to guess by its colour how that wool will scour, because he sees it already scoured. So, where a station scours its own wool, a wool-classer does not worry about how much it will reduce or about the red in it. The red of real Australia may be ugly, but he knows it will disappear. And the

amount of grease scoured from the wool will not affect what remains.

It is this remorseless honesty with which Australian wool-classers draw distinctions against the wool of their own employers that makes it possible for an Englishman to ask year after year for the first clothing of a particular station to make billiard cloths. It was this that particularly struck the English commerce delegates who lately visited a Northern shed.

There still remain the burry pieces which were skirted from the fleece at the wool-rolling tables and are lying on the floor. A boy, the "broomy," sweeps them to the piece-pickers, wool-classers in a small way, who divide it on their tables into first pieces, second pieces, and perhaps stained pieces.

Lamb's wool, which is often only shorn to prevent corkscrew and other grass seeds working into the lamb, is scooped up all in one bunch between wooden clappers and taken to the classer, who classes it simply first, second, and third lambs. The wool of black sheep, good enough as far as it goes, is all clubbed into, perhaps, half a bale.

Heaps looking like flock from torn mattresses are now lying in bins, with various labels. From any one bin they bundle it into a wool press, an arrangement in the safe-like bottom of which there waits an open wool bale. They fill the safe (and

204 On the Wool Track

so, of course, the bale) with wool; fill as much again into what looks like a pile-driver above, and then slowly, by levers, ram this double filling into the single bale below, and sew down the flap.

The solid oblong sacking-covered brick that comes out is weighed, at about 3 cwts., and then branded, thus: 24, Kukuburra, 2nd combing, W.H. That is to say:—

“This is the twenty-fourth bale pressed at Kukuburra station, filled with second combing shorn from wether hoggets.”

XVII

WAGES

ONLY the other day, when a Western shed finished shearing, the nearest town was pandemonium for a fortnight. To-day, if the shed cuts out at 4 p.m., most of the shearers are hull down on their bicycles, and the wool-classer on his way to Melbourne by 6 p.m. Some shearers will clear the town without a drink. Some may set aside a couple of sovereigns for a wet night. A few still get side-tracked, and lose their cheques in a country town. And that is one sign of a great difference which has grown between the shearers and station hands in the outside country.

The shearer is a travelled man—often from New Zealand, nearly always from Sydney or Melbourne. He can look after himself in the town. The station hand too often cannot. He knows it. He has been there before, and within ten minutes of his getting there someone has touched him for his money. The real country man is as simple as a child. But the oldest hands

206 On the Wool Track

in the world loaf about the country town, and they have noticed him come in. Consequently he is suspicious of all towns.

It was said above that, besides the mining town, there were two sorts of towns in the real Australia. One exists on the wool industry. This chapter deals with the other sort. A big run out there will pay £10,000 to £15,000 a year in wages. The industry of the station townships is to make those wages. The industry of the other sort of town is to take them. More than half the wages may get away from them nowadays. In the old times they used to take them all.

When you first see the white roofs of it under heavy, low clumps of pepper trees about five miles off in the mirage on the red plain, there is not much difference between that town and the wool towns around the homesteads. There are about as many houses in one as in the other. The wool township is a trifle better kept. The other sort straggles wider.

But the wool township is the terminus of its own road. The King's high road runs through the other sort. You find it made up of a few incidentals—a police station, a post-office, a school—which are there just because it is a town, and are fairly well built, because the Government builds them; three or four staggering bundles of

No Reason for Hysterics 207

rusty tin, which may be outhouses or the homes of old-age pensioners; some goats, green nettles, scraps of iron, perhaps a sow or two; one small general store to preserve them all from absolute destitution. That is everything. There is no ghost of a sign of any shop or factory that can excuse a town for existing in the red desolation—except one big, well-kept, stoutly-built, prosperous centre of industry—or perhaps two or three—around which it has obviously grown up. That is the hotel.

In the real Australia there is very little round metal coin, because there is very little use for it. Ink and paper are more convenient. The odds and ends a man buys at the station store are mostly debited to his account. The balance of his wages he carries away in a cheque. The first place he reaches is a town with one industry—to take that cheque. As with other industrial towns, the sole reason that governed the situation of it in one square of the map rather than in another was the convenience of that place for its industry. Geography books should explain this. It makes the map of Central Australia more intelligible.

There is no call for hysterics. These things are the same to-day as yesterday. There is nothing unusual to look on at, and nothing difficult to understand. After fifty weeks' un-

208 On the Wool Track

relieved monotony of a ten-mile paddock a man needs a few crowded civilised hours by way of contrast. The nearest substitute a country town offers is a fortnight's blindness to its surrounding desolation. If there were to grow up a population of born real Australians they might have nerves for that monotony. But real Australians are not born.

The station people in the West include a good proportion of those magnificent artisans who would never be there if they could keep their work in the cities; a scattering of the world's wastrels, and a large portion of Australians who have come out West, worked for a year in the wilderness, and now, like most Australians, want to work somewhere else. They receive their cheque and start off. At the boundary of the run, thirty miles from anywhere, they find the first lonely hotel. At the next place, twenty miles on, is a city consisting of three hotels, where there is two days to wait for the coach; last of all is the railway town. To a good few the journey is a hurdle race. They go back for six months and try again. There are men at this hour out-back who have been trying to get to Sydney for five years, and are still trying.

Drink is not a vice in real Australia; it is an episode. Attacks are spoken of as if they were

influenza or measles. A man who drinks is not a bad man. If one thinks he is it is better to stay at home. One will never understand the Far West.

For it is best to face the fact which anyone's eyes must tell him. And the fact is that a pitiable large fraction of these large-hearted, intelligent, simple men of the Far West—the best material in Australia, the truest mates in the world, men who reverence any straight woman who lives amongst them as something more than sacred, men, all of whom with the earnings of a few years could buy their own homes in good country, and literally make Australia—spend in certain regularly recurring fortnights the whole profits of the years between. The whole good that lifetimes of great work amongst the mirages and mysteries of real Australia does for a considerable part of its population is to earn for the hotel-keeper quick profits, and for the workers one feverish fortnight per annum in some desolate village, where it would be a misery to lie dead.

Occasionally men are quite frank with themselves. We heard of one greybeard, who was starting on his periodical campaign, when a lady in the town offered to give him some work.

"No, thank you," he said. "Yer can't do two things at once—not properly."

210 On the Wool Track

But as a rule they start off into town with a thorough conviction that the latest occasion was the last and that they will never touch it again. There are very few stations without some old hand who tells the boss, as part of the formula, when he takes his cheque that he has given it best. He might as well say he had grown wings. One manager told us of a man who was droving with him and who had been for years out in that monotony. They were to camp near a town. A couple of miles before reaching it the man was swaying and talking thickly like a drunken man. He had not had a drop.

We met in the Riverina one man—whilst he lived, the hardest, most honest workman I ever saw—whom his manager would not allow if he could help it to possess a horse. It was some twenty miles into town, and it would mean a trip there every week—instead of a trip once a year—until the horse was sold, as would be sure to happen sooner or later. But it was a constant matter of manœuvring to prevent Isaac getting that horse. He would see a likely pony of the boss's, one that didn't look too expensive, and he'd want to buy him straight away.

"I tink I'd like to be buying t'at pony, Mr Macrae," he would suggest. The boss knew what was up.

"Very well, Isaac. I'll want £20 for him," he answered promptly.

"No, no. I'd want a horse if I gave £20 for him."

So Isaac mopped his forehead, and ruefully gave up his hopes of getting to town that week. A few days later he came back.

"Mr Macrae," he said.

"Yes, Isaac."

"I think I must be gettin' some shirts," said Isaac, fingering his shirt-sleeves. "Dese shirts I got from Connor's last time, they're getting very old."

"Very well," answered the boss cheerfully. "What's your size? I'll ring up Connor and get him to send 'em out."

"Oh, he's not got 'em, not de right ones," said Isaac hastily. Then he looked up sorrowfully like an offended child. "I don't want it for what you tink," he said.

"What do you think I think?"

"I don't want it for what you tink—no," repeated the offended Isaac. He would not say any more.

Every time that Isaac went into town for his spell he had given it best. And every time, after about a fortnight, when he was getting pretty well due to return, he had to be shepherded home again.

212 On the Wool Track

Generally it was done through the kindly police. They locked him up in a friendly sort of way so as to give him the chance of sobering down. Perhaps it frightened him a little too. Usually he was feeling the week's effects when he returned.

"Oh dear," he would say, "I'm very bad."

"How are you feeling, Isaac?" asked the boss next morning.

"Better, tank you."

"Did you see 'em last night?"

"A little," was the innocent answer.

It is an unpardonable offence for a man to get drunk when he is in town in charge of stock or horses so that harm may happen to them. But it is sometimes worth while overlooking it in the case of a man like Isaac. For he was a real sportsman even at the worst of times. He lost a watch in town. The police found out who had stolen it, and locked Isaac up to get sober and give evidence. But he wouldn't prosecute. To every question they asked him he just shook his head and said: "I won't go back on my mates." He lost his watch by doing so. But the idea shaped itself in his head that he had been dealing with this man as a mate, and whatever the man might have done he would not give evidence against him.

As a matter of fact the mates that are picked up in country towns are often waiting there to be

picked up. When a station hand comes in with a cheque they are round him like flies. Two or three of them have seen him drive in from their lounge at the verandah posts at various corners. We struck one case in which an English groom leaving a station with a cheque was "touched" for his money three times before he had been in town half an hour. Fortunately his boss—a boy of about nineteen in this case—had taken his cheque away from him ten minutes before they drove in, somewhat to his amazement. By the time the boss handed the cheque back to him that evening on the railway station he had learned why. The floating population which props up the verandah posts in country towns is as nearly the antithesis of the strong, simple men who live on the stations outside as it would be possible to find.

They have an almost romantic reverence for any straight woman that lives amongst them in the West. Some time ago on a Victorian station one of the employees left; a few days later five other hands suddenly left also, and followed him. They traced him to Melbourne, and they found when they got there that he had shipped on a steamer for South Africa. Then they returned to their station again. If they had caught the man it is a matter of conjecture what they would have done with him.

214 On the Wool Track

The failing of many Western station hands is not by any means wholly their own fault. It is a question how much of the fault in these days lies with those who cater for them.

The publican is not an ogre. He is mostly a generous, good fellow, always pleasant to spend an evening with; often the soberest man in the place. His moral code, which is inherited or bought with the house, may be queer. But whose is not? "If we don't get their cheques here," he says, "the next place will." And there may be some men who do not consider it an unfortunate incident if a man comes in with a likely cheque and gets away with it. By what one heard, most big hotels now scorn to sell drugged liquor, and many small hotels do not.

One squatter told us of how he and two of his men drove a mob of sheep into a country siding to truck them. At the end of a long hot dusty afternoon they reached the railway. Opposite the siding was a hotel. He shouted the men a drink. The men asked for whisky. He himself inquired if they kept anything soft and harmless.

"Ginger beer," said the man at the bar.

So he had his "ginger beer" and the men had their whiskies, and they walked from the bar. The boss had not walked twenty yards before he leant against the fence and was sick. The men,

unfortunately, had stomachs too case-hardened for that. They were drunk. One of them was stupid for two days.

When sheep are lambing men are sent into the paddocks to see that everything goes smoothly. The process is called “lambing down.” By a gentle metaphor the words have been transferred to the assistance which in the old days it was customary for publicans to give to men who came in to get rid of a cheque. The man handed the cheque over the bar. Sometimes he asked to work it out. At other times he expected to receive back the change when he had finished. He lost consciousness a little later; when he came to himself he was in a room with empty champagne bottles all round him. He was told he had been enjoying the time of his life in the interval and shouting champagne for half the town—which may have been true, sometimes; anyway, there was none of the cheque left. The patient was allowed to stay for a few days to get his wits and his digestion more or less fit to face the world again; and then sent off with some rations and a swag for which he was often pathetically grateful, to find work for another year.

“Lambing down” does not happen as it used to; but it is by no means vanished yet. The publican has his philosophy—explained above. “I’m licensed

216 On the Wool Track

to sell grog," as one of them explained to a startled Sydney man, "and, by G——, I'm going to."

We came across one extraordinary case, which gave one a paradox to puzzle a philosopher—a case of a scrupulously conscientious South Australian publican who let his guest work out the strictly full value of his cheque by allowing him one drink per hour until it was exhausted. The guest in question was an old boundary-rider. He came in once a year, lay down on a bench in the parlour, and then the contract was punctiliously fulfilled. The visitor was in a mazy condition, never once drunk, and never once sober, for about a month. Whether conscientious publicans are an improvement on the other sort may be a question.

They notice nowadays, even in the Far West, that the new generation of Australians manages to keep its cheque in the country towns, reach Sydney or Melbourne, and lose it there. That is a step in advance.

But, soberly speaking, though it is understandable and nothing to scream about, though the men who live by it all are no better and no worse than other people, the man who goes into the middle of Australia to understand it, and who realises what an immense amount of brave, monotonous, hard work is carried through year by year for no other result whatever to a fair fraction of the population

than a few days' periodic fever—a man who realises that this pitiful waste of effort, this leak in the nation's energy, is almost part of the system, and who yet comes back thoroughly satisfied that everything is quite as it ought to be, is either wilfully or stupidly dense.

XVIII

TRAVELLERS ALL—FOOTMAN AND BAGMAN

Now what was said in the last chapter does not apply to the station hands on "inside" runs. But in the "outside" one cannot help thinking, in spite of all that is sometimes told of him, that the shearer is, taken all round, the highest type of worker. We could see with our eyes, and everyone agreed, that he got away with his cheque far more often than the rest. There is still a sprinkling of flash, raw shearers left in the Far West, because the wastrels of Europe—scholars amongst them, and sometimes, they say, even priests—drift there, and so do others who do not like to live too near to the police. But except for that strange jetsam, which circulates slowly about the West and seldom comes "inside" at all, the class of shearers has been changing this last twenty years, and the change is pretty well complete.

It is hard to lay down the law about a profession which includes good, bad, poor, well-to-do city men, country men, men from all the States and divisions of Australia, New Zealand, and Europe, and even Yankees.

There jump into your railway carriage at one forgotten bush siding a man dressed like a farmer, another dressed like a stockman, another like a solicitor's clerk, another like a Botany factory hand, a fifth in check tweeds and a green hat, as if he were going to golf. They are all shearers. You can see from the window a man with a billy and a swag starting off on foot along the red road. He is a shearer too.

It is enough to see a dusty figure carrying its swag along the road beside the railway line for superior city persons from the window to class him mentally: "Genus—tramp; species—something of the sort that pokes its head over suburban back fences; sundowner, swaggie, unemployed." There is no such thing in the West. The long stage from tank to tank—thirty miles if it is an inch, hot sun and red dust from seven at morning to seven at night, with nothing but the thought of the free night breeze from the plains, a cup of billy tea with a mate, and a very sweet smoke, when it is all over, to comfort him—does not offer any great allurement to a "tramp."

220 On the Wool Track

It is quite a different man that was passed just now along the rail side. That man was a "footman."

There is some evasive social distinction between the footman and the cyclist. It is one of the most puzzling things in the West, that distinction. Because it cuts utterly against the whole grain of the West to recognise any social distinction at all, except, perhaps, that between a good man and a useless one. It no more enters the head of the stockman that he is the social inferior of the man he serves and obeys than it would strike the captain that he was the social inferior of his colonel.

But all through the West there is a distinction drawn between the man who goes on foot and the man who rides. It is an almost imperceptible distinction; and some people will tell you that it is just a joke; and it is true they do pass it over with a laugh. They are all mates, after all. They are all "travellers." When a man says he met a "traveller" or a "bagman" in the bush he does not mean a commercial traveller. He means a man making his way from station to station, probably a man on horseback with his kit in his bag. They are all travellers; and there is no call to hurt a man's feelings just because he has to go on foot. But the dis-



A SHEARER TRAVELLING.

[Facing p. 220.]

“They were Horrible” 221

tion is more than a joke. If you wet a mental finger and rub it on your mental cheek you can just catch the faint breath of feeling which makes a footman always explain how he came to sell his bike. “No, I’m footing it. I got rid of my sulky in Wanaaring.” “I never carried a swag in my life,” explained a mate of mine on a long trip, “exceptin’ only once, an’ then I didn’t ‘ave to.” It is precisely the feeling which makes an English schoolboy explain how it was his father became a poor man. It is surprising in the bush.

What the shearer in the West used to be we learned from a man who has probably seen more of the Darling and its history than any man living. This was Captain Pickhill, who was on the first steamer that ever sailed up the river, and lives by the river still. He was certainly not over-prejudiced towards the squatters, and this is what he told us of the old-time shearers:

“Lots of those shepherds and shearers near Bourke,” he said, “were ‘old hands.’ Some of them were decent good fellows; and the rest—well, they were horrible! Unmitigated rascals, fearing neither God nor the devil. The language I have heard in Bourke made a man wonder the heavens did not drop down and

222 On the Wool Track

crush him. They were great, coarse, horrible brutes of men.

"I remember I tied the steamer up to the bank near Netallie, many years ago, and sent the boy seven miles across country to the homestead to get some meat. He had to bring the carcass back with him on the horse; so you see it was a bit of a job.

"I had turned in for a doze when I heard a burly voice on the bank. Some hulking great shearer wanted to come on board.

"My wife was on the deck. Presently I heard his big feet on the plank.

"'Where's the cuss?' he asked. That was me.

"'He's in his room,' says my wife.

"'Could I see him?'

"'I don't know,' she answered, 'he may be asleep. He's not very well.'

"'Go up and wake him,' he says.

"Well, I got up and went down. 'What do you want?' I asked.

"'Can you give me some tea and sugar and a bit of flour?'

"'Yes,' I said; 'where are your ration bags?'

"He handed them out. I gave him tea, sugar, and flour enough to carry him along to the next station.

"'I haven't got a smoke,' he says.

“I handed him a stick of it.

“He says: ‘Couldn’t you give us a bit of meat?’

“‘Every sheep we get here,’ I said, ‘we have to bring seven miles on the saddle from Netallie; and that is all the meat we have till Saturday, hanging up there.’ (It was Friday and there were about 2 lbs. of mutton.) ‘No,’ I said, ‘we can’t let you have it.’

“‘Surely you won’t begrudge a man a bit of meat?’ he grumbled.

“I stepped between him and the plank. ‘You lazy, long-nose scoundrel,’ I said, facing him, ‘you empty that sugar out on deck . . . and now the tea . . . and the flour I have given you.’

“He did.

“‘Now,’ I said, ‘clear out over this plank as soon as your boots will let you.’

“That was fifteen years ago, and it was the last I saw of him.”

The huts—the sleeping accommodation—which most of the squatters provided for the shearers in those days were sometimes hardly fit to ask even that sort of being to camp in. The faults were by no means all on one side. Since the law was passed to put an end to this, the shearers’ huts have been made wholesome and, on the whole, comfortable

224 On the Wool Track

barracks, such lodging as any decent man would ask for.

There do exist flash, raw shearers still. We only met one, who talked long and loud of his quarrels with the police, until an innocent-looking boy next door to him asked sweetly if he had been taken up for refusing to fight, when he became suddenly subdued. And of course many youngsters come back with full purses, roaring like lions, who went up-country like lambs. But many are employers themselves—farmers or farmers' sons shearing in their slack season. I heard conversations on every topic better worth listening to than you would hear in the lobby of Parliament. Here are scraps from a railway carriage. "I wouldn't put the tax on this Western land, perhaps; anyway, not till it's suitable for settlement. The river is bound to be dammed and the country irrigated, and then it will be different." "What did I think of New Zealand? Well, some day the mail-boat will start off an' she will not find New Zealand." "I picked it up because it was a good Australian yarn, but the writing's nothing much." The conversation in the hut after tea ranges from shearing to the House of Lords. It covers slow sheds and fast sheds, ringers and records, racing, farming; but more especially politics. Some M.P.'s have much less political philosophy in them than

A German's Evidence 225

the Australian shearer. Elections have been won and lost, candidates put up and knocked down, in those sheds. They have sent one of themselves to Parliament before now—to be the ablest man there.

Shearers are more consistent with their political principles than is often admitted. They will not have a Chinaman or an Indian or an American negro amongst them; but they will work with a Maori or an Australian black-fellow. That is simply because they do not think the former should be allowed here; but they recognise a duty to the latter. They have libraries in the huts, and a committee of their own generally arranges for all sorts of newspapers. They always subscribe a part of their earnings to the local hospital.

A learned German, Dr Robert Schachner, lately took the very enterprising step of peeling off his coat and going to live amongst shearers, miners, and factory hands in Australia in order to see what the condition of each was. He found the shearers in their standard of life, their reading and intelligence generally, the first of the three—and the factory hand far the lowest. "If . . . the spicy air of the bush gives the shearer new life and energy for thought and reading," he wrote afterwards, "it is far different in the

226 On the Wool Track

factory. . . . Scarcely fit to leave school, the boy enters the horrid gloom of the machine rooms . . . from the very beginning he has no knowledge of the part he plays in the general work; the more perfect he grows in that part the narrower becomes his field of activity, till finally he wastes day after day, year after year, in the repetition of a single mechanical trick. What wonder if his brain dries up . . . ?" It is rather strange that the remedy he proposes is a higher tariff—which would presumably produce still more factory folk—not more shearers. But at least he considers the shearer a valuable man.

In fact, in spite of all that is sometimes said of him, the shearer is, take him for all in all, a surprisingly high class of workman. Often the only sign that tells you he is a shearer at all is the scar made by *binde-i* or some other burr in the fleece on the back of his hand. He is most capable of looking after himself these days. A few sharpers with a slight knowledge of shearing often get into a big shed, and get a "school" going—a nightly gamble. They are regularly called "forties"—the forty thieves—and they sometimes make a pile out of young shearers.

But as a whole, shearers, unlike station hands, spend their money deliberately. I met one who

lived all last year in Sydney on £70, and another who spent £90 in four days at Randwick.¹ But then he meant to. Between him and the station hand who left £75 in a country hotel, there is all the difference between a country man and a city one.

¹ Randwick is the site of the big race-course at Sydney.

XIX

PORTS AND FLEETS OF THE DARLING

"Do you catch anything—can you see something white in the trees there?" asked the skipper a little anxiously.

It was on the Darling River, at a point about 180 miles from Bourke, by the river, or 60 miles by land—for the river runs about three to one. The nearest city of any real size was Broken Hill, and that was nearly 220 miles away, and Broken Hill itself, when you get there, is a town in a desert—a freak, a modern city surrounded by a basin as bare as the palm of your hand, and in its colour not unlike it to look at. That was the nearest big town. Stations not very far away, when the Darling runs too dry to float a steamer, send their wool to Broken Hill.

So this was a pretty lonely sort of a spot. The Darling runs between high banks, as steep as the banks of a railway cutting, and in dry times with about as much grass on them. And,

the river being low, the view of the scenery from a Darling steamer is much the same as that from a train in a railway cutting.

Many people say that, therefore, the trip down the river by steamer is uninteresting. So it is if a man sleeps all the time. Because then, naturally, he is not aware of it when the ashen-grey river banks of modern alluvial soil rise suddenly, and grow red, and you realise that you are running now between river walls made of the ancient red soil that once made the hills and valleys of this continent. The grains of the red bank that swims past you there were probably—æons and æons before—the cool red sand to which the olive light just filtered down through fathom on fathom of ocean. Creepy dark things crawled over them, and the deep sea-currents furrowed them. There's not very much of the red soil left along the Upper Darling. But still there it is, rising so clearly from the grey that you could probably put one foot on the modern soil and one on the old. Most of the river homesteads are built upon the red, because, of course, it is the land above flood-mark. What is lower than the floods has been covered with grey alluvium, which has been brought by water from the Queensland hills and which the water still transforms after rain into a sort of sticky black glue,

230 On the Wool Track

which the lightest tyred wheels pick up until they actually clog against the side. The red soil is the relic of the old soil which is still underneath the black soil. It is that same fertile red sand that covers the fences in the real Australia, and it grows all fruits well and wheat excellently. The Mildura fruit farms are built on it, and when the Darling comes to be dammed the irrigation settlements will probably be made on the patches of red soil.

If a man sleeps all day he misses the extraordinary hill which suddenly peeps down at him over the tree-tops at Gundabooka. Its flat top possibly marks the actual old surface of that sandy ocean bed, which has been worn away all round. He misses the curious ridges of rock—all of that same ancient Australia—which every ten miles or so crop suddenly out of the grey bank on one side, straggle obliquely like some old dragon across the water, and disappear into the grey banks the other side.

Those rocks entirely bar the river when it is low. As it rises and they begin to be covered, they will still wreck a steamer. And yet when our steamer, the *Jandra*, was drawing 4 feet of water and there was only 6 feet in the tortuous channel through these rocks, and jagged boulders hidden a foot below the water on either side, we

His South Head Light 231

stood beside the skipper and watched him drive the steamer close under one bank and then shoot suddenly across to the other and back, following a channel of which not a trace could we see. But he knew it by certain ugly oily disturbances here and there in the smooth water. Once, when the river opened—for no apparent cause, but really because of the current swirling round a hidden ridge, with an isolated monster called “Big Ben” somewhere under the surface—into a circular basin, the skipper stopped the ship dead, put a line ashore, and warped her slowly around the basin close under one bank, as carefully as a battleship is warped into dock. There was not a sign on the surface to show that you could not have thrashed the Dreadnought fair down mid-stream. But the skipper could read the signs of his navigation. Other skippers watch the clouds, or the season, or the sunset; this skipper knew by some mark to which the water had risen on some particular snag or rock miles back that there was not enough water for him over the “Yanda” rocks.

But at the particular point with which this chapter opens the river did not look interesting. It was a railway cutting unrelieved by rocks or red soil, or even ducks or pelicans. Only grey bank on one side, grey bank on the other, tops of

232 On the Wool Track

occasional trees looking over them, and a strip of sky and water between. But the skipper was searching for something.

Now, the folk on ships sailing from Chili across the Pacific begin after many days to look anxiously for some sign very, very far away on the horizon ahead—a point or two on the bow, it may be. And there turns up at last, perhaps in the early morning, exactly where and when they are looking for it, an intermittent white flush like the very faintest far-off reflection of a lightning flash. That sign, they know, marks the port of Sydney; and they make for it, and presently lift up a pin point, which is the South Head light.

This skipper, too, was looking for something.

“Do you catch anything in the trees there?” he said.

Then we too looked anxiously as tree-top after tree-top wandered past. We could see nothing to cause excitement.

“Ah, there it is!”

The skipper’s face had illuminated.

We looked; what was there?

“That sheepskin,” he said, “on the lower bough. McClochertie said he’d put it there to show where we were to land his groceries.”

So here was the sign of a port of call on the Darling. The river is, roughly, 2000 miles long,

and looks much the same from end to end. And the captains have to look for—a sheepskin on a lower bough.

That evening we passed another sign. We found over our starboard bow an ancient piece of board—the skipper said it had once been a notice board—nailed across two posts. Beside it was a tree. On the tree was a scar, very old and deep. It was the letter T.

"That's Toorale," said the skipper. "It's eight miles back from that tree, on the Warrego. There's hundreds of thousands of pounds' worth of wool been taken from just here. You can see the mark of it—there."

Down the bank ran a smooth, shallow groove worn in the dry, grey soil by the slipping of thousands of bales. That solitary T is the only mark of a great Darling River port. In some years its trade must have been not far short of £30,000. There are sea-ports living on less than that.

We did not stop at Toorale. Another ship regularly does the trade of that port. We were making for another sign. After panting down river another day, dropping groceries and beer-casks at the port of Louth, taking on fuel by the simple process of tying up, chopping it, and then rolling it down the bank, at last, about nightfall,

234 On the Wool Track

when the sky ahead was peeping in yellow slashes through the trees and shining very softly on the dark river below, we turned into a long reach. We had been driving small batches of ducks ahead of us all the afternoon. The crew and the deck passenger were lying in the bows potting at them with a pea-rifle. The captain would not let them shoot pelicans, and the big deck-hand would not let them shoot wood-duck on the bank, because they could not pick them up. So, except for the hawks in the trees, the ducks swimming ahead of us had received the crew's undivided attentions, and were growing pretty shy of them. Mile after mile they kept ahead in short flights, never leaving the ribbon of river, never letting the steamer get close enough to be dangerous. The assistant deck-hand had just taken the rifle from the fireman for a sporting shot, when the duck, of course, rose. Only this time, instead of flying on for a hundred yards and then swimming again, they circled wildly to the left, high over the bank, and flashed off like lightning through the trees.

It was another sign to navigators.

"That's how I can always tell when the other steamer's coming," he said—"by the duck flying back on us so; or sometimes the other boat's waves coming up the river ahead of her. And it's

the same when we get near a town. The birds won't pass it—they fly back out of the way."

It looked a countrified enough reach in all conscience. We had just passed a sight one had never before seen in Australia—some blue flower, possibly blue-bell, growing as thick between the trees as hyacinths in an English wood, literally a bright-blue carpet of them. We had seen white flowers—both daisy and some sort of peppermint—which you could smell for half a mile, growing the same way, during the last day or two; and a day or so later one found square miles of Dunlop actually carpeted with not only white and blue, but yellow also—one of those extraordinary results which a few days' rain brings from sheer desert in Central Australia. This reach was, if anything, further from the world than the sheep-skin port. There did not seem anything to frighten even a duck.

But presently over the edge of the bank there sailed by the grey roof of a shed. A man passed on the bank carrying a bucket. It was the sign of one of the busiest factories in Australia.

From that day to this day on which I write, nearly two months later, the steamer *Jandra* has done nothing except to make weekly trips to that quiet reach and back to Bourke, getting away as fast as ever she can load with the cargo from that

236 On the Wool Track

factory. I happened to be watching the eight-hours' processions of the trades unions in Sydney. On the last wagon, the carters', there came sailing along 66 bales of dumped wool with the brand Dunlop. That had been part of the *Jandra's* cargo.

They do not call these ports "wool factories"—probably because they are out in the fresh country air, where all factories ought to be. But a man who hears the huge shearing-shed buzzing with machinery on one side, and the wool-scour pump coughing on the other as it sucks yellow Darling soup far up into the troughs in another big shed, and sees the wool fed into the troughs, clawed, clutched, soaped, shaken on iron teeth, finally fed out again and spread on the wool green to be dried under the sun into a dazzling dead white; who sees it carried into the pressing and dumping shed and pressed into half its size and then dumped with hoop-iron bands into nearly half its size again, and finally carted off to a fourth big shed to wait for the boat—a city man who sees and hears all that for the first time cannot help realising that, whatever it may be in name, it is a factory indeed. There are the usual factory regulations. For instance, the water from the wool-scour must not be returned to the river, so it is pumped out, at Dunlop, to irrigate South African Rhodes grass on the plain.

Sailing across Australia 237

People hardly realise that, all the while the railways are fetching their loads and emptying them into Sydney, there runs out beyond them all another stream of traffic in quite a different direction—up and down, past these wool factories, along one of the largest waterways in the world. It trickles slowly and fitfully at right angles to the railways for about 2000 miles—practically from Queensland to the Bight. Up and down the centre of Australia there streams—even at this day—a quite considerable shipping. For all we hear of it on the sea-coast it might not exist. If Parliament could be transported just for one day, and dumped on the black and white wharves thirty or forty feet high, that tower stage on stage above the little steamers at Bourke; if the members could stand on the edge, by the row of steam-jib cranes, and watch Mildura fruits and Japanese onions lowered ever so far down into the little holds below—then the prospects of the Darling people might be different. There are inland ports away there at Bourke and Wilcannia which have still a river trade worth considering. It is true the railways to Walgett, Brewarrina, Cunnamulla, and Broken Hill have cut off great chunks of their hinterland. Before Brewarrina and Walgett lines were built, 22,058 bales in a year came down the river to Bourke, and 4523 up river. Other towns

238 On the Wool Track

have taken the whole of that trade from above. But last year Bourke still got 3000 bales by river from below. There is enough trade left to keep two or three Bourke steamers plying for all they are worth whenever the river is up, and occasionally to draw up one from the big fleets trading on the river below.

You do not realise until you get nearly 500 miles from Sydney that this long river is the chief public possession of the people living over about one-half of New South Wales. The minds of people on the coast are full of railways and roads, Newcastle coal, Sydney Harbour. People in the Far West have one interest far above others—their river.

It is the one great public possession in that half of the State; and yet they hardly possess it. The people who possess it are the majority in Parliament, who come from Sydney and the coast, and who think a great deal of Sydney and the railways leading to it, and do not know or care tuppence about the river.

Of course if Captain Cook had been given a map of Australia before he discovered it, he would have spotted at once a great basin and waterway, and would have marked it off as a State by itself—because its people would obviously have one big possession in common, and would want to combine

Captain Cook had no Map 239

to use it and improve it with their own money in their own way. In that case the Darling would have been carefully nursed, locked, its flood-water stored. And instead of the Sydney railways stopping short of it in the deadly fear that it might be of some use in carrying the produce of its own country away cheaply to its own mouth, there would have been a whole system of little railways running down to it on either side to feed it, much as the small bones run into a fish's backbone.

But Captain Cook was not given a plan. The Darling, when it was found, was tacked loosely on to Sydney. Sydney has pulled a snag or two out of it. The head streams have been dammed, and the flood-water does not reach the Darling as it used to. When it does, with the exception of what is caught by an ill-planned but still useful weir at Bourke, it runs into the ocean exactly as if white men had never come to Australia to stop it. So there are no fruit or vegetables or grain worth considering grown along the Darling. The water has to be lifted thirty or forty feet to irrigate them, and it takes a capitalist to do that. The fruits often come from Mildura and the chaff from Adelaide. Both are near the river; and the goods come over water. But it is generally ocean water. The river water is not there.

240 On the Wool Track

If there is but a chance of a river, the whole country rushes to it. Two years ago wool teams came from the Paroo to Wilcannia on the chance that the river was up. They hurried day after day down the plain, mostly along the part which people who draw maps have marked as the bed of the Paroo River. Geographers have the grace to draw a dotted line for the bed of the Paroo River. It is a Central Australian river, and you can best find the bed of it with a spirit level. The wool teams had come down it and out on to the red country; and at last through the red and white sand-hill into Wilcannia.

When they got to Wilcannia they found the river a thin tawny streak between two dry walls of grey mud as dead as an ash-heap. The river, which was expected to rise . . . had not risen. Some rain may have fallen in Queensland and started off for the plains. But it was taken up by dam after dam across the head streams and fairly withered and scorched up by a thousand miles or so of sun and an atmosphere drier than a stale sponge-cake. Anyway, it expired long before it got near to Wilcannia.

So the teams turned round and went 120 miles to Broken Hill to the railway. That is what the river means to about half of New South Wales.

For one half of New South Wales there is one

thing to be done. It is bound to be done, because it is the one apparent thing that can be done. If it is a failure it is worth spending a million to prove that for half of New South Wales nothing can be done.

The Government of New South Wales, for the price at which it built the Central Railway Station, might have changed the map of Australia. Its own Royal Commission told it that it could put seventeen locks on the Darling for £530,000. It is really no wonder the people of the Far West are a little bitter. It is not that they have any right to look for special favour from the State, because although they are out there under immeasurably the hardest conditions, turning the problematical half of New South Wales into use, and so might well be given every favour by far-seeing Governments, still it is their livelihood; and if they choose to help themselves that way they cannot demand favours on that account. But they can demand that their own Ministers, who are their Government as well as the Government for Sydney, should be able to look at their questions from their point of view.

Yet it does seem impossible for a Government in Sydney, however well it wishes, to stand in the shoes of the Westerner and see things as he sees them. The West will get each of its wants just so soon as it can prove that that particular one is of

242 On the Wool Track

benefit to Sydney ; and it will never get any others until it has the political sense to form itself into a separate State, with a capital neither at Sydney nor Melbourne nor Adelaide, but in Riverina or the Lower Murray, or in some part of those great river basins whose people have the same wants and the same problems, and could agree to spend their own money on their own projects with an eye to their own benefits ; and not to make life easier for the easy livers in a few great cities on the coast.

XX

THE BULLOCKY

"You prayin' beg-gurr! I'll teach you to pray."

The big roan bullock was down on his knees. He looked to us to be doing a tremendous lot. It was evidently the impression which the big roan bullock intended to convey. But it did not take in the little bullocky. He flung his clumsy two-handed whip.

"You beg-gurr," he said. "That'll give you an idea."

They did not often get ideas. They must have been painful things to indulge in. The big roan bullock hopped off his knees like a little dog.

It struck us ordinary city men looking on that the bullocky, as a bullocky, had one fault. He did not hit his bullocks enough. He talked a lot about it. "I'll see to you in a minute," he would hiss. "I'll put t' tape on you. I'll give you sometin' to go on wid, by ghost I will."

But he never did. He worked himself unmercifully. When the whole clumsy arrangement

244 On the Wool Track

lurched, lurched, lur-r-ched, tilted its forty or fifty wool-bales as rakishly as a fashionable hat, and came slow—ly—to—a—fix with a heavy list to port, he creaked and muttered and groaned in his efforts to get it out as painfully as the huge axles themselves. But a more merciful man with animals one never saw.

Perhaps the traditional bullock-driver does still exist, somewhere. Australia is crammed with stories of them—men who when their bullocks were struck would cut the maps of Australia on their backs with a whip, or chop at them with a spade, or even light a fire under them. All one can say is, I never came across even the tracks of that sort of man. The nearest I ever got to him was to find somebody who said he had once seen a fire lighted underneath a jibbing horse.

Bullock-drivers may use fiercer language than other people in the bush. The foulest I heard by a long distance was from a shearer. I looked on whilst one bullock-driver managed his team for half an hour without using a single word that even a lay reader would call a swear-word. It must have been irritating work, too. It was in the mountains in the South, and he was loading tree trunks—"snigging" them into position (that is, dragging them along by their ends yoked up to some bullocks as if the trunk were a wagon), and

“ Proceed—Strawberry ” 245

“parbuckling” them on to the dray (which means looping a chain round them, making some bullocks pull it, and rolling the trunks up skids on to the wagon top). “You fool” was about the strongest expression that man used in twenty minutes. Some people, on being told this story, have obviously disbelieved it.

And yet they have got a story of their own, out in the West, which would go to support it. A team was working on the Broken Hill road, and a bullock—the Beelzebub of the team—had gone obstinate, and the coach was passing. The whip was swinging; and some apt remarks were just forming on the back of the bullocky’s tongue when he caught sight of a clerical hat on the front seat, and just in time thought better of it. He coughed politely. “Ahem—Strawberry,” he said, “proceed!” To his obvious astonishment Strawberry proceeded.

There is evidence obtainable, no doubt, that Western bullock-drivers have not forgotten how to express themselves. But it may be doubted if they really do so any more floridly than other people—miners, for instance. Anyway, when the day of pleading comes a plea of justification will probably serve the bullock-driver. For example:

There was a driver, a big, kindly, bearded man,

246 On the Wool Track

who brought his load of wool across many days of quivering plain. Towards the end of one crawling afternoon in summer the team, with the load creaking behind it, shuffled up to the white gate of a railway yard. The slip of a porter boy from down-country had seen for the last half-hour a dust-storm approaching through the middle of the paddock, and came down to the gate to inspect. He was not old enough to have lost the official manner, but still he was a nice boy, and he asked if he should open the gate. The bullocky looked up across his bullocks at him for a moment, and then nodded. The boy opened the gate, and, being a town boy and not meaning any harm, stood in the gateway to watch.

The driver from the other side swung the leading bullocks round towards the gate. They started, and then sheered off from it. He swung them again, and again they sheered away. He was very hot and tired, and very anxious to get the load up to the wool-bank early and step across the road for a drink, which had been in his mind for some hours. But he did not say a word. He put the leaders around again very patiently. Again they sheered off. At last he stepped round to the off-side to look. And as he reached the other side of the bullocks he found himself face to face with an innocent infant in railway uniform. He put his

hands on his hips, drew in one long, slow breath. Then he opened.

"You brass-buttoned, blanky, qualified, asterisked Government official," he began—it was five minutes before he drew breath again. The boy did not wait for it. He gave one cowering, shrivelled, bewildered glance at the big man, and then made for the station-house as fast as his legs could carry him. He was not frightened of being physically hurt. The big man would no more have thought of hitting a boy than a woman. But he shrank and fled under the sheer force of that language. That was how it affected a man. Bullocks do not have the power to realise that he is not going to hit them; besides, he generally is. So the effect of language on them is not really a strange matter.

There is no bush character so well known or so much talked of as the bullock-driver. One knew all about him long before one ever went into the country. It is sad to lose illusions. But one has come back with very grave doubts whether that friend of our youth exists.

A "boss bullock-driver" in a country town is not a fairy-tale scapegrace. He is a considerable man. Very often he is a steady one. A "boss bullocky" is a man who owns his own team, and perhaps more than one. He may have two

248 On the Wool Track

or three teams with a paid bullocky driving each. Amongst the lot of them there is a proportion that are pretty noisy whilst they are in town. But of what class in the bush cannot that be said?

A "boss bullocky" really superintends a very considerable business—the whole of the transport across a large part of Australia. If a sheep station or a mine or a hotel is started somewhere out near the bottom right-hand corner of the Northern Territory, it is the bullocky who has to take the sugar, tea, currants, and whole wagon-loads of drinks out, and to bring the bales of wool back. It is rather curious that out there the tea and sugar and currants count as the main load, and that the wool comes in as back freight. But it is a fact.

One hardly realised what an immense field these men wander over in their business until one day in a small town at the very last end of the railways, a conversation with one of the leading forwarding agents there was interrupted by a woman who happened to be passing. She turned to him for a moment.

"I hear the boss is kept out on one of the rivers," she said.

"I wonder where that'll be," he remarked.
"The Paroo or the Warrego, I expect."

“Out on the Rivers” 249

“I expect it is the Warrego,” she said calmly, and went on.

Probably the conversation was resumed. But if so, one was hardly listening. A remark had been made, and it was out of perspective. One’s mind was trying all at once to scramble into the utterly new field of ideas which it opened up. It took a minute or two to get there.

The remark meant that this woman’s husband or father was bringing some wool teams, presumably from a place somewhere near the frontiers of New South Wales and Queensland and South Australia, called Thargomindah. Thargomindah is actually in Queensland, but its wool sometimes comes to the railway in New South Wales. In getting there it has to cross 240 miles of white and red country, of which every one hundred square miles probably contains one man, and most improbably one waterhole. But at two places there run across it depressions which hundreds of miles further up in Queensland have been great rivers. Occasionally, when it rains in the Queensland hills, the water of those two fine rivers comes down and spills itself through these two depressions and over the plains beyond. The Warrego fairly often trickles into the Darling. The Paroo has been known to.

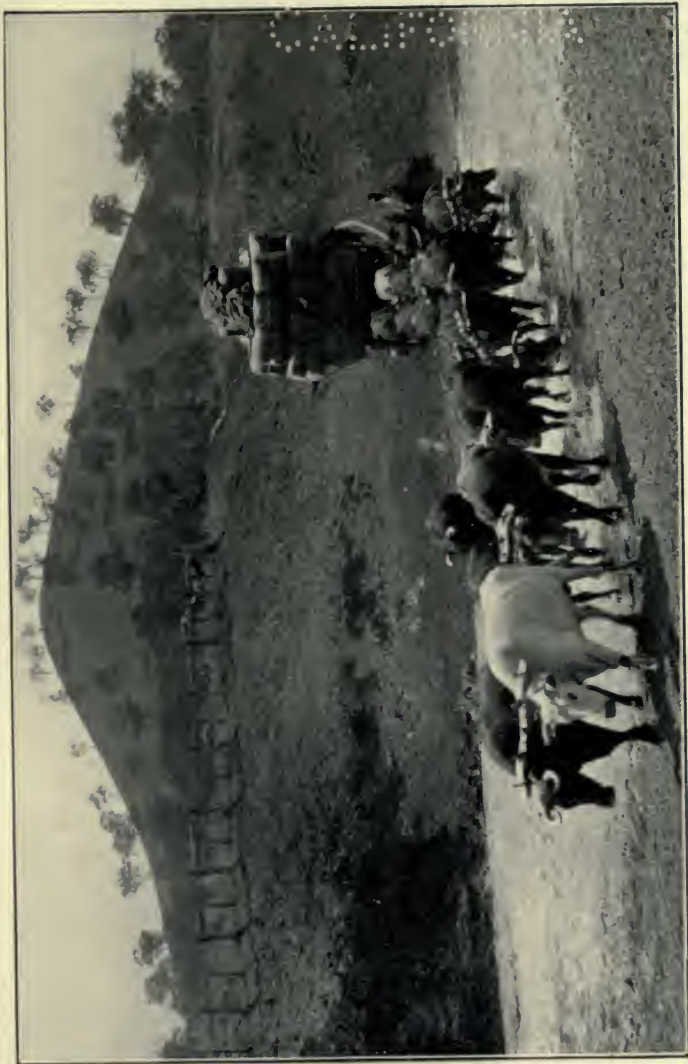
250 On the Wool Track

What had happened was that one of these rivers had come down. The boss had seen the streak of it miles ahead, and when he reached it he found it—as he probably had expected for several weeks past that he would find it—too fast or deep or wide or soft to cross. So he camped on the bank, and was now waiting three or four weeks till it subsided.

As to which river it was there did not appear to be any definite information. He was somewhere out on one or the other—didn't much matter which. They are only ninety miles or so apart.

That is the sort of life it is. A man has camped three months on the bank of the Namoi waiting for it to fall. You find him right out on the plain, a stretcher of sacking on two poles, slung, as if it were a trough for his horse, under the back wheels of his wagon, the edges of the tarpaulin which covers the whole bulk of the load pulled as near down to the ground on either side as can be. And there he sleeps night after night very cosily, with his dog curled up just beneath him, and the fag-end of his camp fire, made up for the night, a few yards away.

The freight is, on a very rough average, about £4 per ton per 100 miles. But it mostly depends on whether there is good grass or not.



THE BULLOCK WAGON.

[Facing p. 250.]

70 353
1888

With luck a man may make three or four trips back to the same shed before the whole clip has left it. There is often a race for it, and a good deal of competition between different bullock-drivers as to which gets back in time.

Stories are told of that competition. But, as a matter of fact, the rivalry here, as in other cases out in the bush, is always decent. Not only is there a strong etiquette, which may not be talked of but is well recognised in all callings in the bush, but these men are in practically every case too generous to leave a mate in trouble. Two men may be racing for the railway. But if one gets bogged in a creek or a cowl (which is a small tree-grown, swampy depression often met in the red country), the other will never leave him there. He would not feel well if he left a man wallowing there when he might be lending him his team. Besides, in the West, who knows? It may be his turn to-morrow.

There have been brutes of bullockies, just as there have been brutes of bishops. But most average bullock-drivers are as fair to their bullocks as they are to their rivals. They keep the whip going for a certain space after the load gets stuck. But as soon as a man is convinced that the job is too heavy for his team, the chances are he will quietly take them out, and perhaps put them at it

252 On the Wool Track

again next day. After all, the bullocks are his capital. They are worth anything from £7 each. And they are easily enough lost, in all conscience, without his destroying them by lighting fires under them. It happens much too often that a man wakes up in the morning and finds £14 worth of bullock lying on its back amongst the thistles. Not so long since a mob of about 600 bullocks on the march from the North camped one evening on Noggabri Common, near Gunnedah. In the morning 585 were dead. There were thistles in the common; and the only guess that can be made is that they came suddenly on to this prickly feed without having had the time to get used to it. This can happen to a bullock-driver any day. A drought is almost worse. One of the first big landholders at Bathurst used to tell of a forgotten drought in the '30's, during which eight bullock teams died in bringing his wool only 150 miles to Sydney.

Perhaps the bullocky has plenty of time to sit down and think of it. Anyway, of all the philosophers in Australia, Sydney and Melbourne Universities included, there is probably not one that gives so much of his time to original thought as the bullocky. The Prime Minister of England would find him worth listening to. He has quite a different manner from the quick-witted shearer or even the station hand. He is more deliberate.

He sits on an upturned box of groceries reading the paper—he is a man who always reads critically—or filling his pipe in front of the fierce fire. And he talks thoughtfully, almost dreamily, in the intervals. He has a way of looking upon men exactly as he looks on the animals in his team.

“Terrible fat fellow, that fellow Smith,” he says, looking up over his reading spectacles.

“I didn’t notice he was so stout,” you remark.

“Oh, he was in wonderful condition when I used to know him. I don’t know what he’s like when the condition’s off him. I’ve never seen him when he was poor.”

The bullocky has the most interesting collection of short stories that are to be heard in the bush. He has travelled longer than the shearer, and, not being a city man, he has noticed every single thing. He has been to stranger places. He was probably a drover once, and—well, drovers still bring cattle into Bourke, who say that in the first part of their journey they had to keep an eye on the blacks, whilst near its end they camped the cattle for the purpose of training them not to be scared at the sight of a man on foot.

It is not always a “boss bullocky” who brings the bales from the woolshed to the railway. Most

254 On the Wool Track

stations have their own bullocky, and often a horse team or two as well. Indeed, there is probably more wool brought in by horse teams in the West than by bullock teams. There may be 12 horses in a team, against 18 or 20 or 26 bullocks. I heard of 36 bullocks yoked up to one wagon in a hole. The horse teams are faster; and it may be taken for granted, an Australian prefers to deal with a horse where he can.

"But in a hole," you are told, "gimme the bullocks. A 'orse is good to go when he's at it, but he hasn't got the heart. If 'orses get fixed for twenty minutes they're punctured. They won't pull any more, however long you stay there. But bullocks, they'll go back nex' day an' pull the same as ever." Mules have never caught on yet, but some people say they must, because of an argument that appeals eternally to the Australian. "They mus' be good. They're using 'em in America."

Sydney people would be surprised if they knew how many of the bales which they see coming from the railway came to the other end of the railway on camels, one on each side of the hump. In a rainy year less, and in a dry year more, of it strings from the centre of Australia—from the very furthest civilisation—like an African caravan. And perhaps more ought to have been made of

“In a Hole—Gimme Bullocks” 255

the camels in these chapters. But it would take both a geography and history of Australia to do justice to the wool industry. And if the bullocky, with his 40 or 50 bales, which has been brought to the railway, has found the railway gates closed upon him, and has turned in till the morning—that for present purposes must suffice.

XXI

THE PORTER

THERE is one man who is generally forgotten in the wool industry. People who would include the sheep-dog would leave him out. It is hardly fair, because he has a big part in it.

Passengers by the mail train which left Sydney in the evening, and has rattled them away all night at any time on the second day, after they have washed the sleep out of their eyes, and breakfasted at Wellington, will roar now and again, twenty miles from anywhere, past a low platform with a name—and a small white tent tucked under some gum tree or myall or wilga near the white railway gate. There lives a man who for the time being is practically station-master and Chief Commissioner and lord of all he surveys. A good half of the passengers at the windows do not even know that he exists. He is the special porter.

The platform with the name is really the railway station for one of the wool towns. Sometimes you see signs of the wool town if you look

The End of the World 257

out for it amongst the scrub on the horizon—a scattered white-washed roof or two. Occasionally the long, narrow, blue iron woolshed is the only part of it within sight. Now and again the woolshed is fairly opposite the railway gates, and the station township, like any other township, is clustered quite close to the line. There is almost always built near the line some office of the great property through which it is running—a back station or an overseer's hut—even if it is only in a back paddock. Once, I remember, on a very out-of-the-way branch, where the one daily train took its business very easily indeed—the only sign of the wool township from which it took its name, and which must have been somewhere away over the plain at the back—was a line of telephone poles, with the loops of wire stretching away and away, and up and out of sight. It was one's first excursion into the real back country, and the plains stretching clear to the horizon, the land of galahs and mirage, which the train was reaching that evening, seemed to lie at the very end of the world. There was in this case a public-house and a post-office opposite the railway, it is true, and a wilderness behind them. On the edge of the wilderness waited a solitary buggy and a girl. But nothing had prepared one to find, on that platform, in what to us seemed a forgotten corner of the great Australian

258 On the Wool Track

desert, two other smartly dressed girls in pretty sun-hats, who waited until a third pretty girl from Melbourne jumped from the train and fell on their necks, and then carried her off into the wilderness with them. However, that is another affair. To the wool siding at one time of the year will come passengers—a score or two of them within two or three days—who climb down from the mail train, and lift down their swags and their bicycles. As the train pulls out they are already stringing off through the white gate, the hubs and spokes of their bicycles twinkling across the paddock. A few days afterwards, up from the horizon at sunset, comes the first dust-storm. An hour or so later you catch the far-off crack of a whip and the creak of an axle-box. Presently the first team of shiny sweating bay horses pulls up to the railway gates. As it is after six the gates are shut. They will not open until six in the morning. The team is taken out. If there is no hotel, a red flicker breaks out a little later. It is the only sign of the hard work which begins with sunrise to-morrow.

The wool season is not a very long one, but it is all the time the carrier—teamster or bullocky—has for making the main profit of the year. As one after another of the sheds in the plain at the back of the railway gets to work, the country for the time being begins to carry quite a respectable

Etiquette of Strict Precedence 259

population. There are stores to take out, and wool to bring in. The teams turn up at the railway gates by twos and threes, every teamster anxious to get his load into the trucks double quick, and get back for another load.

If many teams are waiting ahead of him a carrier may be kept at the railway yard all day wasting his precious time, because the wagons are taken in the order in which they arrive at the yard. Any team which arrives before six at night is allowed into the yard, and once that teamster is in he can unload until long after six. But if he is not at the gates by six p.m. he has to wait till the gates open again at six a.m. Many teams may arrive after dark. They push on in order not to lose their place. They are arriving throughout Sunday, when the yard is closed. And on Monday morning, in big centres like Bourke, there are sometimes 18 or 20 of them strung out one behind the other like a funeral down a quarter of a mile of the street leading to the gates of the yard.

It is only natural that there has been a good deal of rivalry, before now, to be early in to the wool bank; because even at big centres there would only be two or three porters to load, and the last man in that morning's line might not get away before sundown. Some drivers will camp

260 On the Wool Track

opposite the gate, and even leave their teams in all night. But as a rule it is not necessary. Because here, again, there comes in that etiquette with which you have to reckon all through the bush. It must not be thought, because it is so often referred to here, that it is a thing which is always being talked about. It is no more self-conscious than the code which usually prevents one passenger from taking another's seat in a railway train. But it is equally strong because it is equally reasonable. It is not generally necessary for a bullocky or teamster to take elaborate precautions to keep his place at the railway gates, because even if he misses it and turns up late, it is not the thing for the others to slip in before him. A bullocky probably would not have used those words, but the way the station-master put it was: "It's not—er—etiquette."

One morning whilst I was in Bourke four teams were waiting outside the railway gates. At six a.m. the gates opened, and three were driven in. The driver who was first in the line was a little late. Some time after the station-master walked down to the wool bank, and found the three others squatting on the bank smoking.

"Hullo, what's up?" he asked.

"Waitin' for Bill," they said.

"Hang Bill. You get on," answered the station-

master. Of course that relieved them of responsibility. They had to take Bill's place when the authorities told them to. But they would not have done so otherwise.

The wool bank is a high platform level with the truck, and built there to make the loading of bales easy. Two or three wagons draw up alongside it at a time, and the driver of each will help the porters to load his own particular wool. Some men may be slower about the work than others, and it must be galling at times to those behind who are itching to get away. But the one thing they do not do is to show it. It is not etiquette to grouse.

As long as there are trucks enough the loading goes straight ahead into the trucks. Each wagon is weighed in as it comes into the yard with its load on, and weighed out again as it leaves it empty—in order to find the net weight of load. A porter checks the weighing, and the bullocky is given a receipt. He sometimes tries to obtain a clean receipt—a statement that the bales were received in good order. He is lucky if he gets it.

But sometimes, especially at the small wool sidings in between the main centres, the trucks cannot always be had when they are wanted. Just when the people at that wool township are wanting

262 On the Wool Track

them there are many other wool townships after them also. In that case they do not keep the teamster waiting. Probably there is no wool bank. But they let him choose a dry place near to the line, and leave his wool there. Usually there is some bit of high ground which will do. It is important to keep the wool dry, because bales will become so heated if rain soaks into them that they have been known to burn by "spontaneous combustion." The railway supplies a tarpaulin to cover the wool, but not to be put on the ground underneath it. A careful driver can dig a trench round his wool if he cares to. Which does not mean that he always does it.

Now the driver's work ends there ; and the rest of the job is done by a man of whom very few people know anything. These wool sidings have no staff during three-quarters of the year. During the other quarter they have one porter. He is probably under the authority of the station-master at the next station up or down the line ; but that may be twenty miles or more. The porter camps by the railway fence. He receives the wool. And he, to all intents and purposes (except for five minutes in the day when the guard of the visiting goods train happens to be on the platform, and automatically takes for the time the command of it like a visiting admiral), has upon him the whole

responsibility of the Chief Commissioner for Railways.

The engine-drivers and firemen and guards—the men who have their homes in town, and who camp in sleeping-rooms at the railway station when they get to the country terminus—these are the sophisticated men of the bush, the men who go daily to the great city and mix with officials and politicians. But this porter, as a rule, is not a permanent railway hand. He is a man chosen in one of the country railway districts, perhaps from Bathurst or Blayney, and taken on for three months or more specially for this work. He is generally a man who knows what wool looks like—because he has to handle it and give receipts for it; and if he does not know whether there is anything wrong with the bales, or if they are quite secure when he has loaded them, there is no one within twenty miles whom he can very well ask.

One had a vague idea before going West that they loaded wool by piling it into a truck. It was only a beginning of a series of disillusionments to find that was the one thing they particularly avoided. Wool is not piled into a truck. It is built up on it, in four tiers, on a certain system, by which every tier locks the tier underneath it. The fourth tier of five bales placed side by side along the very crown of the load locks every tier under-

264 On the Wool Track

neath it. And the only fastening needed is an easy lashing over the top of the truck, which locks those five bales in their turn, and a couple of minor bindings.

Loading is a complete science—a very pretty one. There is one system for loading undumped wool; quite another for loading dumped wool; another for wheat bags; another for chaff. Each depends on the shape of the bag or bale. Chaff sacks are loaded on edge, because the bottom corners of a chaff sack protrude like ears, and lap over the sack beneath, so as to lock. As for wheat, if it is properly loaded the bags need not be counted. They know that in a Carnegie truck (that is, they say, a 15-ton truck, a number of which were brought from Mr Carnegie's steel-works at Pittsburgh) there will be exactly 135 bags.

The ordinary undumped wool bales are built up like bricks, and, provided they are as regular in size as bricks, which they ought to be, exactly 45 to 47 of them can be put into a big truck, and 38 to 40 in a small one. It makes no difference to the number that can be got into the truck whether the wool is greasy or scoured, because a bale of scoured wool, though it has lost all the grease in it, and weighs very much less than a bale of greasy, takes up the same room. Now, the railway only charges freight on the weight of the wool. Con-

Enterprise Unrecognised 265

sequently, if scoured wool only paid the same rate per ton as greasy wool, a truck of scoured would be earning much less than a truck of greasy. To make up for this, scoured wool is charged a little more heavily than greasy. It costs £3, 9s. 2d. to send a ton of greasy wool from Bourke to Sydney, and £3, 15s. 5d. to send a ton of scoured wool.

That seems perfectly fair, because scoured wool takes up more room for its weight than greasy. What does not seem fair is, that if the station goes further and has the enterprise to squash each bale of scoured wool into about two-thirds of its original size by dumping it (which means binding it round with two bands of iron so tightly that what was the length of it becomes about the same as the breadth), that station should still have to pay the same freight as on scoured wool not dumped. Both dumping and scouring are done to save useless weight and space from being hauled about; and space in the State's trucks can be saved by dumping, and the woolshed is the proper place to do this; and an allowance ought to be made for it, as is done in Queensland.

When the bullocky and the porter together have tugged, shoved, heaved, steered, slewed the bullocky's bales from the wagon up to the truck and crawled all over them like ants, and hooked them over other bales and into their exact places,

266 On the Wool Track

or when the bullocky has been allowed to stack his wool by the line for want of a truck, the bullocky's work is done. But not the porter's.

It may be late on into the night. But once the wool is on the truck the railway takes on itself the responsibility for it. The railway man could not turn in snug into his tent and leave the sky outside bulging with big rain-clouds and the wool stacked without a cover. The porter has to lash it, and sheet it with tarpaulin. If it did rain, and the wool were uncovered, and were found to be wet and had to be opened and dried and repacked—which costs the railway 10s. per bale—the porter would hear further of it.

It is all very well at big cities with two porters. But the solitary man at the wool siding has a heavy day. He has no wool bank to load from on a level with the truck. He has to haul every bale up from the wagon top, a foot or two below. It is not always easy to make a neat load in those places. When the train calls for the truck the guard has to inspect the loading and check it; and even then the station-master at the next station has to give another look to it.

For it has happened before now that a bale has fallen off whilst the train is going. If it falls between two trucks it may throw one of them off the rails. The truck thrown off bumps along

innocently in the middle of the train, kept straight by the trucks ahead and astern of it until probably it lurches too heavily, and its axle breaks.

After that anything may happen. But, whatever happens, seeing that on most of the far-back lines a train behind may always follow on thirty minutes after the train ahead, the guard goes back along the line as fast as he can, taking six fog-signals, and lays them in pairs along the metals from 800 to 1200 yards. Then he can go back at his leisure and help to lift the truck back, or topple it over off the line, or send the engine on for help, or do whatever seems best in his discretion.

What with the science of loading, and the chance of a summer storm wetting any stacked wool before he can cover it, the special porter has often an anxious time. But they say that this year trucks may be fairly plentiful again; and even in former times it has not been often that more than a hundred bales have had to be stacked at once. Wool trucks do not seem to have been cornered in the way in which, by all accounts up-country, the stock trucks last season almost undoubtedly were, by way of pure monetary speculation, when they were most bitterly needed.

But that again is another story.

XXII

OUTWARD BOUND

EVIDENTLY it was a scene in the Chamber. Being a mere Australian, one stood in the corridor casting about for the cause of the din from behind the big polished doors. But a Frenchman would have known offhand. Without doubt it will be Sir Reid interpellating the President of the Commonwealth Chamber of Deputies. One swings the door open. The uproar begins again. The Frenchman must be right.

The President of the Chamber sits high on his seat like a judge on the bench facing the deputies. On either side of him—a man scribbling. Below, in the place of the Clerk of the House—other men with pens. In a box on the right a crowd of reporters. This half of the Chamber mute, impassive, intent. The other—a dog-fight.

An elderly German in the white suit and cummerbund of an operative colonist waves his hands frantically. He bawls, "One . . . One

One . . . One," like the foghorn of a steamer backing amongst traffic. An American below, posed like an orator, frowning like Napoleon, melodramatically hypnotises the President with one hand. "Wahn — wahn — wahn," he cries. Above, a chubby French boy: "Won—won—won—won—won," always shooting out his hand intent to pierce the President. A second elderly German folds all his fingers over his face. He opens them periodically like the swell-box of an organ and roars. The foghorn answers, "One—one—one."

The deputies occupy an amphitheatre opposite the President. There seem about ninety present; eighty of them silent behind their little desks. The rest leap like Jacks-in-the-box, stand shouting, waving, gesticulating like fanatics. Decidedly a demonstration by the extreme right in the Commonwealth Chamber of Deputies.

Imagine this all at once:

"Eight a half."

"Three—Three—Three—Three."

"ThreeThreeThreeThreeThree—Nine—Nine."

"Nine—Nine—Nine."

"NeyNeyNey—Ney—Nine—Nine—Nine."

"One——One——One."

"WonWonWonWonWonWonWonWon."

"'alf."

A Frenchman says "'alf," and it ends as

270 On the Wool Track

suddenly as it began. They all sit down red in the face, mopping their foreheads.

Then in a flash the mystery explains itself. The President says quietly, "Eight an' a half—Rougineau," and taps his desk with a small hammer.

It is not the Chamber of Deputies. It is the Sydney wool-sales.

Towards the end of winter a number of well-paid foreign gentlemen arrive to buy the wool in Sydney. Towards the end of the summer they sail home again, and find out roughly what wool their principals will be wanting next season. Towards the end of winter they come back again to buy it.

Nearly all the Sydney wool goes to foreigners. Last year it went mostly to France. France took 264,000 bales, England 245,000, and Germany 225,000, Belgium 91,000, America 27,000, and Japan 8000. Perhaps people now alive will live to see the last name first on the list.

The amount of wool that England buys from New South Wales has halved itself in the last ten years. As late as the Boer War, England bought 64 per cent. of all the wool from Sydney, and foreigners only 36. Last year England bought $28\frac{1}{2}$, and foreigners $71\frac{1}{2}$. The decrease has been almost yearly.

Why England sets Fashions 271

The English are not great manufacturers of Australian wool. Foreigners are. The English have never specialised in manufacturing fine wools. Far back in these articles it was explained that the true English sheep is an animal about the size of a small calf, with enormous joints of tender meat and a long coarse wool. That sheep is as pure-bred as any merino, but because it is not pure merino Australians have come to call it "cross-bred." England used to be—and though few realise it, still is—a great wool-producing country. There are still 30,000,000 of these big sheep in England—not far behind the numbers of New South Wales; and the English have always stood by their long coarse wool. They make serges and rough tweeds (Harris and Cheviot) and cloths for men's clothes out of it—tailors' cloths. They do not specialise in the fine fabrics for women's dresses. Germany and France do that.

That is the real original reason why England always sets the fashion in men's dress, whilst women's fashions are set in Paris. That is also why the French and Germans want merino more than the English. It is noticed that fine merino—wool that will wind out longer than 64 hanks to the lb.—is bought in Australia by French

and Germans. They seldom go below 64's. The English seldom above.

But the cream of Australian wool is skimmed by Americans. They will pay any price for it—the highest generally in Victoria. They must have it for this reason. There is plenty of good wool in America, hedged round with a heavy tariff. It is useless shouldering wool from outside over that tariff unless it is wool that cannot be grown inside at any price. The best Australian wool is unapproachable—clean, bright wool, where American is full of earth. American manufacturers bring it down to a healthy level by a plentiful dilution of their own.

Germans, French, and Americans prefer to buy in Australia and get first pick. They have forced some English firms to follow them. But the English prefer to buy at the London sales, where they can choose their time. In the old days all the Australian wool was sold in London. The London sales are still the biggest in the world. But every Australian State except Western Australia now has its own sales, and they are growing hand over hand. Wool is sold at two places in Victoria—Melbourne and Geelong. The Sydney sales, which are bigger than the other Australian sales put together, are coming near to the London ones. There were 1,045,000

English Trade Decreasing 273

bales of Australian wool sold in London last year, and 752,000 in Sydney. The foreign town where wool auctions are held is Antwerp.

That the English prefer to buy in London is not enough to account for the decrease of English-Sydney trade, because since 1900, when England bought 64·1 per cent. of all wool leaving Sydney, the increase in the Sydney sales has only been 18·7 per cent., whilst the decrease in the wool taken by England from Sydney has been 35·7. England is the largest buyer at other Australian sales. But nearly all the Sydney wool goes to the Continent.

So most of that pandemonium is made by foreigners, and the most demonstrative of the foreigners are Germans. At a first glance one puts down the most excitable men in the tumult as French. But they were not. The strangest calls, the most unrestrained gesticulators, come from the Germans—probably because the wildest competition comes from the Germans. It is that which causes the cat-calls. In this way:

When wool is knocked down at a price, the man who first made that price gets it. There may be fifteen of them shouting the price for ten seconds before the hammer falls. The auctioneer may reasonably forget who did make the price. So they invent distinctive yells to remind him. The elderly German is making noises like a schoolboy,

274 On the Wool Track

with his hands in front of his face, in order to be original. That call is his idea.

At some sales the buyers have jumped on their seats, scrambled on one another's backs down the alley, edged right to the table where the clerk of parliaments should be, and finished bawling at the auctioneer within a few feet of his face. A man has been seen to get one leg over his desk and wave it wildly at the auctioneer. But all the buyers are not so demonstrative—Anglo-Saxons, for example, and certain others. High up, on the back tiers mostly, sit a few quiet dark men, with black coats and well-brushed black hair, hour after hour ticking off the sales on their catalogues. They know what they want. Over a half-spent pandemonium—"half, half, half, half,"—you hear one quiet "three," and the lot goes down to the Japanese buyers. They will probably need more wool every year. If Australia does not supply the whole of it she is not doing her work.

The actual wool being sold is lying miles away across the city under low dark floors, down dim passage-ways, between great iron-bark pillars in some wool store. About a third of each lot is on the top floor, under the bright glare of a roof mostly made up of skylights—every bale slit open, and the bright wool tumbling out of it like froth from a pewter pot. To that carefully lighted floor,

whenever that store happens to be selling, they bring about every third bale. During the morning the buyers have gone there in white overalls, like motorists, catalogue in hand, sampled every lot, and made a note on their catalogues of the price to which they are prepared to go. The broker's price is already printed there. Then the buyers go back to their chamber at the Royal Exchange. The firm's auctioneer takes his turn—selling 200, 1000, perhaps 1500 bales. c c

It may have been a lot of first pieces—greasy—that was selling when we came in. The broker's price in the catalogue (for one pound of wool) was $8\frac{1}{2}$ d. The sales go by farthing rises. The meaning of the hieroglyphics printed above is as follows:

A German first offered $8\frac{1}{2}$ d. What he said was "eight a half" (that is halfpenny). Another German raised the price to $8\frac{3}{4}$ d. He said "three" (three-farthings). A Frenchman cut in the next moment with the same offer—"three." Seeing the German had beaten him the Frenchman raised his bid to "nine" (9d.). A German and Belgian struck in simultaneously with "nine." All three and more shouted "nine," until the elderly minute-gun roared "one, one, one" (one farthing— $9\frac{1}{4}$ d.). The Frenchman rose neck and neck with him—"won, won, won." That uproar continued till the Frenchman said "'alf."

276 On the Wool Track

He had raised it to $9\frac{1}{2}$ d. The limit which the others had noted on their catalogues was $9\frac{1}{4}$. So they stopped. The wool, instead of going to Hamburg or Antwerp, went to Havre.

When a man has bought a lot he goes back to the top floor of the wool store and sees all the bales. If, for example, he finds a bale of pieces has been marked "fleeces" by mistake, the bale is withdrawn. If out in the real Australia they have forgotten to put the station brand on a bale, and the wool store paints it on instead, there is a protest at once. No one may mark a bale except the grower. If a broker suspects that a buyer wants to be quit of a heavy price they go to arbitration. All this and much more is what is meant when one hears of that strict honest code, the rules of the Sydney wool-sales.

All this is modern and scientific. There are other Sydney methods that would interest an archæologist.

The port of Sydney is really older than the port of London. It dates back to the dim past before the coming of the railway train. The other day there wandered into Sussex Street an Australian who had left Australia as a little boy. In the interval he had grown to love London, and he was homesick. Some vague reminiscence back in his brain brought him to a stand in Sussex

Street. The long line of storehouses, the procession of carts lumbering both ways, the air heavy almost to mistiness, thick enough for hay-fever, with a mixture of dust and chaff and cheese, and a certain subdued monotone of tarred rope ends running through it, puzzled him. He had stood in that place before—but when?

The answer flashed on him. It was not quite the same. But given a dismal rain, cobble stones covered with a thin layer of greasy mud, railway vans hooded with dripping black tarpaulins instead of open lorries, and a distant suspicion of Billingsgate—and he was looking at Lower Thames Street, London, and no other.

The truth is, the port of Sydney is really the older of the two. The port of Sydney was out of date within fifty years of its discovery. Because then the railways came to other ports and brought cargoes to the ship's side, or took them from the wharves, and the age of the modern port began. Sydney never entered that age. Circular Quay, Farm Cove, Woolloomooloo, Darling Harbour, were built over long before with wharves and warehouses and streets leading to them. Not an inch was left for the railway when that came knocking at the city gates.

The railway did not get to the riverside in Old London either. But it did crawl down on to the

278 On the Wool Track

river flats below the city and meet the ships there. And a new London grew up around it. The old port of London by London Bridge was abandoned to the lighters and Dutch barges. The old warehouses huddle there still. The drays still crawl like a stream of ants up and down Lower Thames Street. But the port of London has gone far down the river. The city that was built there is a newer city than the city of Sydney.

So Sydney is really an old-world port—so old as to be almost obsolete. It cannot be quite obsolete, because berths where great steamers can lie and poke their noses in at the back windows of the city cannot be abandoned, railway or no railway. But something will have to be done to make Sydney a modern port like Liverpool. The shore is too costly to resume; the rock under Sydney makes tunnelling expensive. An overhead line above the base of the wharves, with the advantages of overhead loading, may some day be built in Sydney as well as in Liverpool.

To this antediluvian port on its magnificent harbour come yearly about a million bales of wool. The wool train backs into a semicircular shed. Across a semicircular platform like a fringe are the wool-contractors' carts.

Almost every bale has to be carted through the narrow streets, backed across the footpath into

the wool store, unloaded, stored. After the sale it threads its way to the ship through the heart of the town in front of the trams and behind the buses, piled twenty or thirty bales on a lorry, with exactly the same scientific appliances—camels excepted—as when it lurched across the desert from the Four Corners to the Paroo. That is how wool gets from the railway to the ship in Sydney these last days of 1909.

If people were prophets they would have clubbed all the wool stores outside the city, and let the trains run in and out of them; just as in Melbourne they slaughter sheep and freeze them in one building, and truck them without man handling to the ship. Perhaps it is not too late to concentrate the wool stores around Pymont, even now. But there is a huge capital sunk in them. In Winchcombe, Carson's new store, there will be eight and a quarter acres, in five floors, each 300 by 240 feet. There will be $30\frac{1}{2}$ miles of hard-wood joists, 4 miles of iron-bark girders, $3\frac{1}{2}$ of posts and bearers, 160 of flooring.

They must use wood, not steel, in these stores for fear of fire. Where steel buckles and lets the building down, iron-bark stands straight until it is eaten through. And those posts hold up a huge wealth. In Dalgety & Co.'s big store alone on Tuesday last there were 50,000 bales. Putting each

280 On the Wool Track

at £11, 15s., there was £562,500 in that store. That is why the posts that support it are 16 inches by 16.

Those bales covered six acres, and they had come in ten, twenty, or thirty at a time. But they could find instantly any one bale of any lot, and wheel it up to you on the top floor within a few minutes. That store is built close over its own wharf. Steamers of 12,000 tons lie one side of the wharf. On the other, high up in the store, they shoot the bales down to any floor, wheel them to a hydraulic press, which squeezes each into less than a span's breadth; bind them with iron hooping, and tumble them into long pipes leading from the upper floor across the road to the very ship's side. Bales have come to the store and been passed through it, dumped and all, to the wharf within four minutes.

Alongside that wharf there lies to-day not a 12,000-ton steamer, but a stately, beautiful sailing ship. There are only three or four sailers carrying wool these days—mostly training ships. The German *Sophie Charlotte*, the British ship *Port Jackson*, are two. The *Mersey*, with sixty cadets all trained for four or five years, and all pledged to become officers in the White Star line, was the third. There lies there to-day nearly the last of a great line of tradings reaching back to Nelson's

time. She is like a beautiful memory. But it is really to the days when those graceful clipper bows were ranged round Circular Quay, when the captains kept open ship, when the incomings were a matter of ceremony, and at their outgoings the fiddler sat on the capstan and gave tune whilst the hands hove the cable home, and other crews all round the quay cheered her as she passed—it is to those days the port of Sydney belongs.

XXIII

THE LAST CHAPTER

AND so it comes to the last chapter. It is a strange thing that, though one asked again and again of wool-growers and wool-classers out on the stations, none of them was able to explain the processes that would happen to their wool when it came to the last chapter of the story. Afterwards one found that this chapter and some which had gone before it all hung on the difference between "carding" and "combing."

Carding and combing are two different ways of making a woollen thread. The two threads may be equally strong and equally valuable; but they look different, they feel different, and they have different uses.

Wool is not really the smooth, sleek hair that it looks. It differs from hair in being sheathed with strong, rough-edged scales. Hair is sheathed with scales, too, but they are smooth ones. Under the microscope wool looks like the rough trunk

Why Wool makes Cloth 283

of a date-palm. Merino wool is particularly scaly.

The reason why wool is more valuable than hair or cotton is that when these horny threads of it are laid across one another they interlock. You can bind cotton fibres into a thread by laying them parallel and twisting them like rope. But not by laying them across one another. They do not hook on. Wool does. The process by which the fibres of wool are laid across one another so as to hook on is "carding."

They have invented a machine which takes the wool exactly as it comes from the scour—except for a little oil sprinkled on it to keep it from flying,—automatically weighs out to itself small quantities of it every minute or so, and then proceeds first to separate them and break up the order in which the fibres have arranged themselves on the sheep's back, and afterwards to relay them across one another at every possible angle and separate them and relay them again and again and again till they are so matted that when automatically stripped from the last roller in the great machine they come off in the form of a thin, gauzy film—utterly without strength, but still hanging together if delicately handled.

The way in which the machine lays and relays the fibres is by catching them on rollers clothed

284 On the Wool Track

with millions of small teeth, from which other rollers with gradually diminishing teeth pick them off and shuffle them, and eventually let them pass to still smaller rollers further on. The wool moves from end to end of this machine in the form of a thin film of fluff, coating the teeth of the rollers. The teeth are really small bent wires fixed by the million into "card-clothing" of leather or other material. In one big machine there will be 56,000,000 teeth. The cylinders bristle with wire like thistles. One sort of thistle—the teasel—used to be used for carding, and is still used in some factories for raising the nap on cloth. Now, the Latin for thistle is "carduus," and the French for teasel is "chardon," and the English for a sort of thistle artichoke is "cardoan," and that is how "carding" came to be called carding.

They may not be satisfied with one shuffling of these wool fibres. They may put them through two or three carding machines, always with smaller teeth—teeth so small that on the last cylinder their surface feels like emery paper. But the process is the same. The wool comes off the last machine hanging together, not because of any twist or any strain put on it, but merely entangled. It is whilst this thin sheet of fluffy stuff is leaving the last cylinder that the real thread-making begins.

The Beginning of Thread 285

About a hundred narrow parallel bands pass through the film, and each carries off on its surface a continuous strip of it. Each delivers its strip between a pair of leather rollers—rubbers—which rub their surface constantly backwards and forwards as the wool works through, exactly as a man rubs tobacco between his hands, so that the strips come out rolled, but without any twist. Each strip is called a “sliver.” It looks like a thread of knitting wool, but having no twist it is without strength.

It takes only one act to turn these soft, feeble “slivers” into a strong woollen thread. That loose conglomeration of fibres has only to be tightly twisted to find it very firm. And that is what “spinning” is. The “slivers” are taken to the spinning frame—perhaps a hundred of them at a time. The end of each is fixed on to one of a row of spindles. The spindles automatically retreat four or five yards across the floor, drawing out the hundred soft threads after them. Then the spindles suddenly start revolving 5000 times a minute, each winding the thread on to itself, and giving it a twist stiffer than that of a wrung towel; and the frame slowly works back to the “slivers” to repeat the process.

The thin, strong woollen thread which results from that twisting is called “woollen yarn” or

286 On the Wool Track

“carded thread.” It is the result of a sort of barbed wire entanglement, a confusion of fibres worse confounded. The ends of the fibres stick out of its surface in all directions, though they are twisted almost into a solid mass in the core of it.



THE TWO GREAT PROCESSES.

1. Woollen thread.—Carded, tangled (under the microscope).
2. Worsted thread.—Combed out and twisted (under the microscope).

These ends make a soft, fluffy covering to the thread like the down on a peach. That soft, furry surface bloom they specially aim at producing. As it is the result of the ends of the fibres standing out of the thread, it follows that they want for these soft threads a wool with many ends. A very long fine wool is not a good wool for this, because its

ends are too few. A short wool is sufficient for the entangling process, and it gives a softer surface. And that is the reason why short wools are used for carded thread.

The second way in which wool is made into thread is almost the exact opposite of the first. It takes very little account of the hooked scales—the “serrations” of the wool. Instead of mixing up the fibres and entangling them, it makes a thread much as they make a thread of cotton—by laying the fibres neatly alongside of one another, and then drawing them out and twisting them as a string is twisted.

It is not much use laying very short ends of wool alongside one another, and hoping to bind them by giving them a twist; because there will not be enough twist in their length, and they will come apart on being strained. For that reason a long wool had to be used for making this thread. That long wool has first to be cleared of any short fibres that are in it. The short wool is combed out of it. That is how the whole process (which is really a sort of twisting of long threads) goes by the name of “combing.”

And so there, in Sydney, standing in a long rickety room full of revolving steel contrivances, before a machine in which two small circular combs revolved inside a large circular comb, and

288 On the Wool Track

tore the white band that was fed to them fibre from fibre, delivering the short torn wool and a burr here and there, and maybe bits of second cut into a cylinder beneath, and passing out at the back a continuous band of long straight gleaming white—there for the first time one saw laid open a clear chain of causes of which the other end stretched away and back as far as the Central Australian paddocks and the red, sand-covered, quivering, dazzling plain. It was to breed a wool which would escape that bucket under there, and would be drawn off from the combs in that stream which passed out over the back of the machine, that they were working year in and year out amidst their droughts and their dust-storms and their little desert towns. Here one was looking calmly on whilst their great task was working past the test of this jaggling, jarring machine.

So that was why in the darkness of the big shed, with the glare of Central Australia peeping through the chinks, they had separated the fleeces into “combing” and “clothings.” The “combing” were the long fleeces that would stand this test, and would be made into a fine, shiny, clean-surfaced thread by being laid parallel, drawn out, twisted. The “clothings” were the shorter fleeces which would be made into a soft, furry thread by being entangled and then twisted—the sort of thread out

“We Have Changed All That” 289

of which English clothing was, and still is, mostly manufactured.

That—very loosely explained—is the reason for the old distinction between the “combing” and the “clothing.” It has almost been broken down in these days, because the Germans have invented and are using machines for combing not only wools with a long staple, but comparatively short wools also. Even “pieces” and “bellies” can be combed nowadays. It is a question whether some of the wool of the sheep that are sent to Sydney for meat—whose skins are made into leather and glue, and their fat into tallow and soap—cannot be combed also. If it can, there will be room for big profits in Sydney.

So it does not follow that “combing” wool is the only sort used for combing in these days. In England they generally comb only the long wool; but abroad they comb almost anything. Whether the foreign method can ever give quite the same strength which the British method gives to the thread, is very much to be doubted. But the British method is inherited from a day when a lady’s dress was passed as a legacy to her daughter and her granddaughter. And—we have changed all that.

The mere combing does not make combed wool into a thread. It merely separates the long wool

290 On the Wool Track

which will be made into a thread in that way. The "noil," the short stuff which fell into the bucket, will have the burr burnt out of it with acid, and will afterwards be carded into soft woollen thread. But the long wool which passes the comb will be made into a hard-faced thread in several operations besides the mere combing. Even before it is combed it is carded like the other wool in order to break up the arrangement in which it grew on the sheep's back, and to produce a long, even-flowing stream of it. But instead of being stripped off the last cylinder in a hundred little ribbons, it is all gathered into one even band a few inches wide, and wrapped round and round in large balls. After this, in another machine, rows of steel pins or combs are plunged into the band as it travels through what are called "gill boxes," and are dragged through it at different rates—which has two effects; it combs the fibres parallel, and it draws the band out. After this has been done again and again, with finer teeth each time, the long fibres can be seen through a microscope all lying parallel to one another, and only the short curly fibres, that have escaped the teeth, lying across them. That is the stage at which the combing comes in. It takes out the short curly fibres, the "noil"—you see them tumbling into the bucket by themselves along with the

burrs that remain in the wool. And only the long straight parallel fibres are left. The clean, smooth, shiny, well-stretched band which is wound away when the combing is finished is wrapped around itself into a great white ball. The wool in that stage is called the "top."

At that point comes a break in the manufacture. It is possible to draw out and spin the top into thread there and then. But for the most part the factories stop there, and sell the "top" all ready for other factories to spin. A "top" is a recognised article of commerce exactly as a ball of wool or a reel of cotton is. The making of "tops" is one of the great industries of Bradford. When the wool comes from Australia they call them "Botany tops," though there was probably never an ounce of wool shipped from Botany. It is a strange thing that the one big factory in New South Wales for the making of "tops" has lately been built at Botany. The big German firms can make 120,000 bales into "tops" in the year. They are trebling this Sydney plant to deal with 20,000.

These "tops," which they are now sending from that Botany factory to Japan as fast as ever they can make them, are the only manufactured wool which Australia exports. They have to compete abroad with the manufactures of the world. But there does seem to be really room for an

292 On the Wool Track

Australian industry here, because if this wool is sent to England to be made into "tops," all the "noil" that is in the long wool, not to speak of a considerable part of the red soil of Australia and the burrs that grow on it, and the grease if the wool is unsoured, have to be shipped with it—and freight paid on the lot. If the Australian manufacturer is careful to buy a wool with plenty of the real Australia dusted through it—which is every bit as good a wool as any other when it is scoured, but is a bad wool to carry to England unsoured, and is therefore cheaper than cleaner wool—he ought to have a good margin for profit. The Commonwealth Government, to set that manufacture on its legs, gives a small bonus on every pound exported for the next year or two. And to make up for it, the State Government leaves its one big manufacturing centre entirely cut off from any railway. So much for "top"-making.

The wool-combers are generally content to make merely "tops," but the trade has not yet been so divided in Australia. You may see every process from the dyeing of the fleece to the pressing of the cloth, for example, in the factory of J. Vicars & Co. at Marrickville.

The thread is made from combed wool by drawing it out and spinning it. I watched at

the Marrickville factory while sixteen ribbons of wool were drawn out into a single ribbon of less width than any of the original ones. Of the ribbon that resulted eight bands were again drawn into one, and then six of this and four of the next, and so on—until in the end the remnants of no less than 221,184 original strings of wool had been combined and drawn out to a thread almost as slender as silk, which was being wound around a bobbin so fast that you could only see the film of it from a spindle revolving 7000 times a minute.

That thread in which all the fibres had been laid carefully lengthwise had naturally hardly an end of fibre sticking out of it. It was a hard-faced shiny thread. For some reason or another they call it “worsted.” The soft thread made by the other process they call “woollen.” Of one of the two, or of a combination of them, all woollen clothes are made.

One is not going here to describe in detail the process of weaving, or the wonderful machine of which the first cranky grandfather was invented 125 years ago by an English clergyman, who had never even seen a loom at work, and was utterly ignorant of machinery. It struck him from the little he knew of weaving that there were only three motions in the whole process, and that as they followed regularly on one another they could

294 On the Wool Track

be produced by machinery. He got a carpenter and a smith to build him the machine he described to them. And out of that clumsy concern has grown the wonderful machinery of to-day.

The various coloured threads in the pattern that run lengthwise down the cloth are arranged in their order before they are taken to loom. But the different colours that run across the cloth are mechanically arranged at the loom. The man who arranges the order of the warp has in his hand a paper with a few numbers on it. At the loom—running perpendicularly from top to bottom of it—is a chain something like a big bicycle chain, with different projections on different links. That scribbled paper and this bicycle chain are the pattern.

If you watch the warp as it is regularly raised and lowered whilst the shuttle with the grey weft flashes through it, you will find that exactly when you are expecting it, exactly when it ought to appear, a different shuttle carrying a red weft has shot past. And before you realise it the red streak in the cloth has been woven into it and left behind. The man who can watch that machine at work without the cold creeping down his spine will be proof against most sensations.

Sometimes the warp consists of worsted threads and the weft of woollen threads. Sometimes they

are both woollen or both worsted. The worsted threads are always clearly seen. You can pick out every thread in their pattern. The woollen threads hide themselves behind their soft downy surface, and often conceal the pattern. A worsted cloth is neat and bright. The thread that makes dress cloths and serges is worsted. The cloth is porous, and apt to wear shiny. For softness and elasticity and warmth and comfort it is not comparable to the woollen cloth.

In a woollen cloth they take advantage of the scaly nature of the wool even after the cloth is woven. They soak the cloth in a solution of soap, and then squash it out between rollers, and finally squeeze it in through a narrow box. This forces the scales of each wool fibre to interlock with the scales of fibres on every side of it. It is called milling or felting, and it is sometimes continued for twelve hours, and cloth that went in eighty-six inches wide will shrink to fifty-six inches, and shrink correspondingly in length also. When it comes out there is not a trace of the individual threads left. The cloth is one solid smooth felt. Afterwards something like a lawn-mower moves over the face of it—shears off the long fibres, and leaves a soft down. That milled cloth is the sort of cloth they make a soldier's red tunic out of.

They have machinery nowadays by which a boy

296 On the Wool Track

can make almost any mortal thing as well as the oldest handicraftsmen. The world has passed the old English weaving centres long since, has left them far behind in the race to get rich in a hurry. But there are still one or two refinements of manufacture that no machine of itself has yet compassed. There is a certain valley deep in the Gloucestershire hills where from father to son they have given their whole honest lifetimes of work to the weaving of certain cloth. It does not much matter what they pay for their wool, because the work they put into it is so great that the original cost of the wool is of small consequence beside it. They make there—amongst other things—a cloth that is truer and softer and more even than any other cloth in the world. They need for it a wool of an even staple, of exquisite quality and not over-long, so that the even ends of the fibres may stand up and make a perfect surface for ivory balls to run over.

That cloth is billiard cloth. And the wool—they call the wool first clothing out in the real Australia.

THE END



LORD GLENESK
AND THE
"MORNING POST"

By REGINALD LUCAS

AUTHOR OF
"COLONEL SAUNDERSON: A MEMOIR"
ETC.

Bound in buckram, with eight Photo-
gravure Plates. 16s. net. Obtainable
at all Libraries, Bookshops, etc.

PLEASE SEND FOR PROSPECTUS

Mr GEORGE SMALLEY, in *The Morning Post*, says:—"Mr Reginald Lucas has told the story of Lord Glenesk and 'The Morning Post' in a lucid and cheerful style, with a wealth of interesting detail from which the reader may, if he likes, draw his own conclusions. . . . The tone of this book is what Lord Glenesk himself would have liked, the tone of the man of the world."

Three Lady Novelists

Miss PRISCILLA CRAVEN

Miss PRISCILLA CRAVEN has, in her new novel just published, dealt in a convincing and masterly fashion with a very delicate subject. The critics for the most part seem to have overlooked the sincerity with which the subject is treated, with the result that the reviews are not so flattering as the book deserves. Nevertheless, the public appreciates the work, as it is in very great demand. Send to-day for "LIFE'S COMPASS." At ALL libraries and most bookshops. 6s.

Mrs L. LOCKHART LANG

Mrs L. LOCKHART LANG'S new novel, "BUBBLES AND TROUBLES," has, unlike "Life's Compass," met with unanimous praise at the hands of the Press. The following extract from the *Morning Leader's* review is typical of many:—"Messrs Rivers have discovered a new humorist and a thoroughly original book . . . a most refreshing and unusual novel." At ALL libraries and bookshops. 6s.

Miss LOUISE MACK

Miss LOUISE MACK has already achieved popularity by means of "The Red Rose of a Summer" and "Theodora's Husband." Judging from the advance orders, however, the libraries and book-sellers are being besieged with inquiries for her new book, just published, entitled "IN A WHITE PALACE," and everything points to her previous successes being totally eclipsed by the new work. Order it to-day to avoid delay. 6s.

READY OCTOBER

**SEYMOUR
HICKS:**

**TWENTY-FOUR
YEARS OF AN
ACTOR'S LIFE**

WRITTEN BY HIMSELF

WITH FRONTISPIECE

2s. 6d. net

THIS BOOK IS DUE ON THE LAST DATE
STAMPED BELOW

AN INITIAL FINE OF 25 CENTS

WILL BE ASSESSED FOR FAILURE TO RETURN
THIS BOOK ON THE DATE DUE. THE PENALTY
WILL INCREASE TO 50 CENTS ON THE FOURTH
DAY AND TO \$1.00 ON THE SEVENTH DAY
OVERDUE.

SEP 25 1935

AUG 7 1944

JAN 17 1945

DEC 13 1945

25 Jan '49 DB

AUG 17 1989

AUTO. DISC.

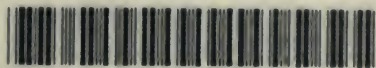
AUG 02 1959

CIRCULATION

DEC 10 2002

YB 34564

U.C. BERKELEY LIBRARIES



C020996807

252244

DM104

B-2

Baron

